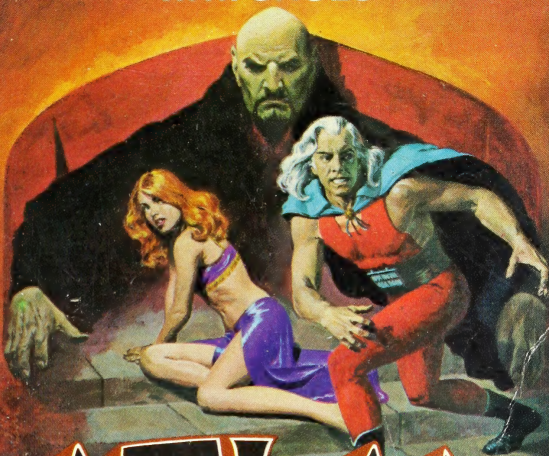
TWO COMPLETE NOVELS

A SPECIAL RELEASE

PERRY RHODAN

THE WASP MEN ATTACK

W.W. SHOLS



ATLAN #1

SPIDER DESERT

ERNST VLCEK

ACE 66098-3 $1.75

CAST OF CHARACTERS

SOME HAVE "IT" AND SOME DON'T! A MIND-SNATCHING EXPERIENCE FOR—

PERRY RHODAN—as Chief of the New Power, a prime target
Reginald Bell—Rhodan's right hand
Khrest & Thora—two members of the Arkonide Empire, Sol-stranded
Freyt, Nyssen & Deringhouse—3 ex-astronauts for U.S. Space Force, now vanguards of the New Power's defense
Homer G. Adams—a big-headed little man of affairs, mostly financial
Jeanette Lawrence—Adam's receptionist
Clive Cannon—gangster leader with a "gift for the host"
John Marshall—telepath of the Mutant Corps
Allan D. Mercant—his secret service is no secret
Dr. Frank Haggard—the New Power's Minister of Health
Dr. Eric Manoli—Rhodan's experi-medical specialist
Ras Tschubai, Tako Kakuta—teleporters of the Mutant Corps
Anne Sloane—her specialty is telekinesis
Lt. Klein—on home guard in the Dome
Col. Kaats—of Federal Criminal Police, USA
Capt. Brown—an assassin of the police
Prof. Norton—section chief of Post 37
Phil Steinberg, McPhan & Knox—some of Cannon's "boys" in the Bluebird gang
Bill, Brian, Schley—men incidental to the action
Marge—Cannon's receptionist
Porter & Lt. Firelli—as said, some have "it"! Mind Snatcher transformees
Joe Linker—temporary pseudonym of someone you know

WARNING! THIS ADVENTURE MAY DRIVE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND!
A TALE WITH A STING IN ITS TAIL

PERRY RHODAN: Peacelord of the Universe

Series and characters created and directed by Karl-Herbert Scheer and Walter Ernsting.

ACE BOOKS EDITION

Managing Editor: FORREST J ACKERMAN

WENDAYNE ACKERMAN
Translator-in-Chief
& Series Coordinator

CHARLES VOLPE
Art Director

PAT LOBRUTTO
Editor

Sig Wahrman
Stuart J. Byrne
Associate Translators

Perry Rhodan

THE WASP MEN ATTACK

by W. W. Shols

ace books
A Division of Charter Communications Inc.
A GROSSET & DUNLAP COMPANY
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10036

THE WASP MEN ATTACK

Copyright © 1977 by Ace Books

An Ace Book by arrangement with

Arthur Moewig Verlag

All Rights Reserved

DEDICATION
This American Edition
is Gratefully Dedicated to
TIM WHALEN
for His Inspiration
Augmented by Yeoman Efforts
in Organizing the
FIRST PERRY RHODAN
CONVENTION (USA)
—Forry & Wendy Ackerman

First Ace Printing: September 1977

Printed in U.S.A.

THE WASP MEN ATTACK

Prolog
page 7
1/ THE HIDDEN CAVERN
page 9
2/ INVASION ALERT!
page 30
3/ THE EARTH PANICS
page 44
4/ A MONSTER NEGOTIATES
page 67
5/ ATTACK FRONT: NEW YORK
page 88
6/ HIDDEN SHADOW MONSTER
page 103
7/ COUNTERATTACK!
page 112

ATLAN #1

Prolog
page 129
1/ BENEATH THE WEB
page 131
2/ STRANGE PARTNERS
IN A STRANGE LAND
page 137
3/ IN THE LOST LABYRINTHS
page 144
4/ THE GIRL IN THE ARENA
page 153
5/ THE MARAUTHANIAN RUINS
page 164
6/ IN THE PIRATES' LAIR
page 175
7/ THE TREASURE BARTER
page 188
8/ THE DREADED TRAP
page 202
9/ AMBUSH IN THE HALL OF SPLENDOR
page 214
10/ IN THE SPELL OF THE SINGING GOD
page 226
11/ FROM DEADLY VISIONS
page 241
PERRYSCOPE
page 248
AD
page 252

PROLOG

Perry Rhodan has flown to Venus in the Good Hope, *the auxiliary craft taken from the remains of the Moon-stranded Arkonide spaceship. On Venus he has set out to establish a support base and training center for the New Power. But here he has also discovered a secret that is older than human history—so ancient, in fact, that Arkonides Khrest and Thora know nothing about it.*

This secret involves the existence of a mighty Arkonide Central Base, operated by robots which have endured thru milleniums and are as functionally perfect as the day they were made.

For the New Power this of course means an enormous expansion of strength and future capability—which has come just in time. For Perry Rhodan soon receives a radio message which alerts him to an extraterrestrial invasion of The Mind Snatchers . . .

THIS ADVENTURE RELATES THE MISSING EVENTS BETWEEN "BASE ON VENUS" (#4) AND "SPACE BATTLE IN THE VEGA SECTOR" (#5).

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2013

http://archive.org/details/perryrhodanwaspm00wwvl

1/ THE HIDDEN CAVERN

IT WAS TIME—the end of hours of concentrated work in locked seclusion.

Perry Rhodan depressed the purplish knob with its strange white engraving. The etched symbol reminded him of a letter in the old German runic alphabet; however, today its origin didn't matter. It was enough to know that it indicated the switch for cutting off power to the super positronic Brain.

A monotonous vibration which he had only been subconsciously aware of ebbed away. The magic eye scales dimmed out and the sonic diaphragms became rigid and still. The largest, most versatile and powerful positronic brain ever to be stationed in the solar system registered zero activity.

Rhodan leaned back, exhausted. The dialog with the almost omniscient machine was over with.

The vast silence that was just settling in the sub-Venusian mountain cavern was suddenly ruptured by a repeated buzzing sound. Rhodan manipulated the intercom unit. "Who's there?"

"It's me!" Reginald Bell's husky voice left no doubt as to who was behind this anonymous "me".

From his table, Rhodan activated the door lock release. "Come in, Bell!"

"What the devil, Perry!" Bell exclaimed as he came in. "You worry me! For more than 24 hours now you've barricaded yourself in this spooky cave. One would think that you were on the trail of the greatest secret in the world!"

"We're always on that trail, my friend, but if in spite of it all we still keep bungling, it must mean that the secret is very far off."

"I'm willing to bet you haven't eaten a bite during all this time."

"Correction! I had some dry food rations. I can't afford to make even little mistakes any more."

"Nevertheless I consider it misdirected ambition if you. . . ."

"Even misdirected ambitions are a luxury I cannot afford. None of us can."

"Last night I rang your bell, this morning I tried three times, and right now I have been at your door exactly two hours trying to get in. Why didn't you answer?"

"Because I didn't know it was you. I didn't want to be disturbed. In the meantime the Brain has been so attuned that outside influences can penetrate it so long as it is activated."

"I've heard rumors that you have recently made a number of adjustments on the Brain. Is that correct?"

"What do you mean? Could you be more specific?"

"Khrest referred to your brainwave pattern. He insists that, perhaps, you know the exact structure of your own personal vibrations."

"Go on. Up to now you haven't told me anything. Are you trying to accuse me?"

"I am sure nobody has any intention of doing that."

"Of course not—that's because they are afraid of me. Nevertheless, I think they are jealous. Am I right?"

Bell tried to avoid Rhodan's penetrating eyes. He regained his composure somewhat. "There is always some envy involved. But everybody believes in you. They know you are the boss and they are grateful, too, that they can always come to see you when they can no longer face their own problems."

"OK." Perry Rhodan nodded his head. "I do know my own vibrations. And this robot brain is tuned in on

me, too. Never before have I encountered such a vast accumulation of knowledge ready to be divulged to me. And still the problem is not solved. I think in the same manner as an Arkonide, as far as that is possible for a person born on Earth. I think as the builders of this machine think, even though I have semantic difficulties. Unfortunately it is impossible for us to learn to translate the scientific material of the Arkonides in a matter of days. We lack the background of the Arkonide. Don't envy me, Bell. A conference with the Brain lasting 24 hours is mentally and physically fatiguing."

"But was it worth it?" There was both curiosity and expectation in Bell's voice. Perry Rhodan nodded his head. "They have hidden hangars deep inside this mountain. The Brain mentioned 6 spaceships."

"That's more than the Arkonides can use. Thora and Khrest need only *one* spaceship to return home in. I don't think you are elated with these developments, are you?"

"I must find those spaceships."

"But you are secretly hoping you will not find them, either. I know exactly what you are thinking, Perry. We need Thora and Khrest. We need them on Earth, and also in the solar system, but not 34,000 light-years away from here. You should keep quiet about the existence of these spaceships."

"Do you want me to use deception? Do you expect me to go behind the back of these Arkonides to whom Terra owes her political unity and betray them? Do you want me to repay their friendship by treating them like captives? I don't believe that such conduct would be conducive to the understanding between our two races."

"You call it betrayal. I call it diplomacy."

Rhodan made a strong motion with his arm, dis-

missing any further attempt at clarification of his position.

"We shall find what there is to find, Bell. There is no doubt that we must keep Thora and Khrest close by, if we intend to improve our own position and that of the people here on Earth and place it on a firm and healthy foundation. Nevertheless, we also must remain loyal to our friends. The hangars must be due north of here. We shall look for them. And you are coming along . . ."

"Six spaceships!" shouted Bell, impressed. "That's enough to accommodate all the personnel of the New Power. With six Arkonide spaceships it might be possible to accomplish a round trip thru the whole universe!"

"So you would be willing to attempt an escape? Do you know what would happen if we were to dissolve the New Power?"

"Probably the same as what has happened to humanity repeatedly in many millenia of its existence. Envy, ill will, a craving for power. Wars. Perhaps there would be only one more war. The final war."

"You know pretty well. And since we are rather fond of humanity we shall temporarily give up any idea of a round trip thru the universe. Even if the Arkonide spaceships should happen to be ready to go."

They went outside and Perry Rhodan locked the door to the room which housed the Brain, by means of a newly discovered code. Only he knew the key to it.

Before them a labyrinth of cavernous dimensions opened up. Over a month ago they had found shelter in the interior of the mountain on the northern hemisphere of Venus. For more than a month they had been tracking down the secrets of this last witness of a long forgotten Arkonide expedition.

In order to gain insight into these events, it is impor-

tant to trace human history back more than 10,000 years.

In the prime of Arkon, when none of her people as yet showed any signs of degeneration, an expedition of several hundred Arkonides landed on Venus in a spaceship and built this fort as an operating base. Atom-melting rays had burned a maze of passages into the mountain cliff and erected a city invisible from the outside. The equipment of this station had done justice to the high standards of Arkonide technology and civilization in all respects. For Earth people of the 20th century, it was like a fairy tale and as unbelievable as the unreal stories of a distant future.

And it was like a fairy tale for another reason, too.

It appeared to them like the castle in Sleeping Beauty. The Arkonides of yore were no more. They had discovered Earth and had found the third planet an ideal world for settling down. The new colony of Arkonide emigrants had risen on Atlantis. Earth's first epoch of technology had been their gift to it, yet it had disappeared along with the whole continent that once existed between Africa and the Americas.

Even though the group of humans had gotten used to their new surroundings during the last four weeks, they could not keep from reminding themselves of its historical background.

"I cannot understand that they are no longer alive," said Reginald Bell as they got into a small railway car which traveled into a few of the main branches of the subvenusian city. "Did they all live on Earth when the catastrophic flood drowned Atlantis?"

"There is no explanation," replied Rhodan. "I wish you would get it straight in your head what the results of the findings indicate. Had there been any survivors, Arkon as the central planet would have been notified.

They would have sent new settlers or at least would have dismantled this fort or remanned it. Khrest and Thora explained to us that today nobody on Arkon knows anything about the existence of this Venus station."

"Naturally I have grasped long ago the implications of your combined theories. However I permit myself a certain amount of skepticism. It could have a different explanation."

"Do explain to me the reason for your doubts."

"Well, quite simple. Khrest and Thora were able to convince us that this station was built by the emigrants of an Arkonide spaceship. Now, however, you speak of six spaceships that are supposedly hidden here. Six spaceships make up a fleet. If there are really six full-fledged Arkonide starships on this planet, I am certain that these also had a direct connection with their own planet. Therefore it would appear that Thora and Khrest lied to us."

"You could have spared me that last comment. One should only come to such a conclusion after one's suspicions have been proven correct."

Bell recognized that Rhodan was not in a mood to continue the debate, which was based on mere suspicions. Therefore he kept quiet and leaned back into the cushions of the little vehicle. It was following a long tubular extension of the cavern that stretched about 2 kilometers from the heart of the fort to a point deep inside the mountain. To Earthlings, the size of the whole layout seemed senselessly overdone. Bell voiced his impression and shook his head.

"Of course you have to marvel at the accomplishments of the Arkonides. Nevertheless I find it ridiculous to construct a simple fort of such dimensions. Undeniably it implies a pretty narrow-minded personality when a person shoots sparrows with cannons."

"One also shoots at the lack of gray matter when a person is not using the proper yardstick," replied Rhodan wryly.

"And what is the proper yardstick?"

"The Arkonides themselves. When you look at this labyrinth, you place too much emphasis on the expense as measured by our human technology. But with what the Arkonides have available to them, it is by no means such a terrific thing to bore passages and caves ten or 20 kilometers into a mountain."

Rhodan interrupted his didactic words and stopped the car.

"Come along!" he ordered abruptly and turned to one of the big gates which lined the passage at regular intervals. A flick of the switch on the closing mechanism sufficed to set in motion 7 tons of sliding doors made from Arkonide steel.

Reginald Bell opened his mouth in surprise as his gaze fell on the open hall. Not that he was impressed with the equipment and the size, which was much too grandiose for his liking. Since the discovery of the fort near the end of May he had already had the opportunity to marvel at all of these things and he had tried to become accustomed to their scale. At that time the hall had been quiet and almost lifeless. Today, however, it was suddenly alive. Subtle noises of every level reached his ear. Measuring scales, dancing equipment needles, electronic and positronic lights beamed and flickered in a variety of hues. Robots of various sizes and shapes rushed here and there between the stationary machines.

"Close your mouth!" said Rhodan and gave Bell an indulgent smile. "I think you have already seen the factory."

"But I never saw it in operation. Did you start it?"

"I thought it was time we got such a completely

outfitted plant as this into operation again. 10,000 years of slumber is enough—we can't let such productive capacities as this go to waste."

"Hm-m," said Bell, deliberating, letting on that he was still skeptical. "You were telling me a while ago about using the right yardstick. The same thing goes for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I think this fortress was built by Arkonides *for* Arkonides. So if anything gets produced here it could only make sense to an Arkonide."

Rhodan's expression became grave. He placed a heavy hand on his friend's shoulder. "Listen, Bell. There isn't much time because those six spaceships are weighing on my mind. What's happening here is important to Earth, not Arkon. Our new hypno-knowledge of Arkonide technology and science would be difficult to apply directly to human needs. For weeks I've been wrestling with that question. I've dug into every accessible nook and cranny of Arkonide knowledge and have finally come up with a carefully worked out general plan of action. What gets built here will be solely for the needs and use of humanity. This robot plant is going to produce robots again, as well as construction machinery and automatic weapons. Look at that automatic conveyor to your right. Those redesigned positronic work machines have never been seen before by any Arkonide!"

"You're doing this without Khrest or Thora knowing about it?"

"I'm doing it because it's the right thing to do. Thora and Khrest are intelligent Arkonides, yet as a human being I think I'm more capable than they are of judging what's good for Terra. Far be it from me to go behind their backs, if that's what you're getting at."

"But they might take it that way. The distrust be-

tween them and us is far from being erased. Even you are not sure of your own attitude, Perry. That's how it seems to me. I'm thinking of the six spaceships. Remember how we reconstructed the Arkonide emigrants' past history? Their colony on Atlantis has disappeared. If there had still been Arkonides on Venus at that time, they would have died by now because they would not have had a way to return to Arkon. The six spaceships that the Brain informed you of simply do not fit into this picture. Perhaps you will tell me what you found out?''

''There isn't much to tell. I was unable to elicit any details from the Brain with merely the keyword 'spaceship'. I only know that these ships have to be in a separate cave near the northern slope. We shall look for them and take it from there.''

Rhodan put together a battery of sonic measuring instruments and chemo-analytical gear. He activated a work robot that was parked nearby and ordered him to load his handiwork onto a small rail car and board it himself. Then they rode perhaps 700 meters farther north to the end of the passageway. A smooth concrete wall blocked their path to the mountain cliff.

''Do you think it goes beyond this?'' asked Bell, swinging down from the car.

''The Brain spoke of a separate cave. According to that, there is no access to it from here. But first we have to find the location of the cave.—Robby, set the blue instrument down next to the car! The rest of you can stay up there.''

Reginald Bell was instructed in the operation of the instruments and after a few minutes he was in position to assist Rhodan, as his mind had been equally activated thru a hypno-training course. Each measurement was double-checked, that is, once thru pure echo impulses and again thru chemo-analysis. That way, they

soon had an exact picture of the layout and composition of the mountain range all the way out to its northern slopes.

At a distance of 8 kilometers, their measuring instruments suddenly registered a drop in pressure.

"The cavern!" shouted Bell, louder than necessary.

"Okay!" Rhodan nodded his head. "Make a note of the coordinates! Let's proceed radially for now, to calculate the diameter of the cave. After that we can extend the measurements laterally."

It took barely another half hour until they had completed their diagram on the electronically guided drawingboard. And then there were two long faces.

"Do you understand that?" asked Bell.

"Not quite yet. At least we know, due to our double-check, that the diameter of the cavern is actually no longer that 95 meters. An error is impossible."

"But you will hardly find six full-sized Arkonide spaceships in such a mousehole. Maybe they have separate hangars."

"If it fitted into that, then a single spaceship would be too small. Our *Good Hope* measures 80 meters across. And she is only a patrol ship with an operating range of barely 500 light-years."

"Then we must be dealing with smaller vehicles," reasoned Bell. "With rescue ships or patrol ships. It seems our excitement over Thora and Khrest was superfluous. They have to stay."

"Here is the entrance", said Rhodan and pointed at the diagram which they had just sketched. He simply ignored Bell's words. But secretly he was hoping he would be right.

* * * *

They flew a few kilometers northward in the *Good Hope*. They made it across the towering mountain tops

and, keeping the spherical spaceship close to the steep mountain slopes, they descended slowly. When they reached the proper altitude, Perry Rhodan stopped and regulated the gravitational equalizer, until the ship reached a steady position approximately 500 meters above the valley floor, appearing almost weightless.

They quickly found the entrance to the mysterious hangar. Although the erosion caused by the Venusian rains had polished the northern slope nearly as smooth as a mirror, the snythetic surface of the double entrance doors was easily visible. Aided by their Arkonide spacesuits, which also had built-in antigrav equipment, Rhodan and Bell left the ship and approached the cliff. The closing mechanism and its combination setting posed no problem for them. They had gotten used to the Arkonide way of thinking thru their hypno-schooling.

The manmade portion of the cliff eased sideways and made an opening of 20 meters at most.

"Too large for a human being, yet too small for a spaceship," Reginald Bell stated matter-of-factly.

Before them gaped a dark, horizontal shaft. The low-hanging clouds of Venus permitted only a dim twilight and barely illuminated the entrance to the tunnel. A quick thrust impulse in the spacesuits was sufficient to carry both men a short distance into the mountains. They turned their antigravity switches to zero and once more found themselves on firm footing. Aided by their own lanterns they soon located a highly complex circuit board. Rhodan worked a switch and immediately the cavern was bathed in a blue-white light.

The entire installation was still in working condition, just as it had been 10,000 years ago.

Just this fact alone was worthy of admiration. Yet in the course of the last few months they had had to get used to many an Arkonide marvel. The shock of the

fantastic no longer had the same effect as it did in the beginning. And even more interesting than the lights that were powered by energy cells many thousand years old was the hangar itself.

"Exactly six!" noted Reginald Bell, impressed. "But they appear to be toys. I hope you are not disappointed." Rhodan's behavior betrayed quite the contrary. He was ecstatic. Instinctively he knew what he had here. He peeled himself out of the bulky Arkonide spacesuit and leaped onto the first machine.

"Toys you say? But then they must be dangerous toys. Come up here and take a look. There is room for exactly one man in such a thing. Perhaps you might give it some deep thought and then tell me what it is all about."

Reginald Bell reached for the edge of a delta wing and pulled himself up. "It looks like a pursuit plane. The spindle-shaped body appears almost transgalactic. It looks a lot like the space ships of the Fantan people. But the aerodynamic rudder effect and the delta-shaped wings could come from a drawingboard on Earth."

"Commonsense and logic will always lead to the same results. Here is your proof. Or do you doubt that these Arkonide pursuit planes hail from Arkon?"

"Absolutely not. Even the similarity in the arrangement of the instruments proves it. Obviously everything is a little less complicated than on the *Good Hope* but the principle is the same. The single seat is located inside a pressurized cabin. The service panel for the particle-thrust engine is there. This guarantees lightning-fast jet propulsion. There is a switch for pressurizing the combustion chamber, and this electronic eye is doubtlessly meant for observing the propulsion nozzle adjustment vanes. I can see, Perry, you are not

at all disappointed. You probably prefer this air fleet to six super-spaceships."

"One of these days we shall build such ships ourselves, Bell. I believe right now we are needed on Terra and these lightning-fast pursuit planes are just the right gift for us. What do you think about a test flight?"

The excitement showed in Bell's eyes. "Do you trust me to fly this gizmo on the first try?"

"If you don't, you should have Thora give you your training money back. Go ahead! Jump into that crate over there. I'll take this one."

* * * *

The current manpower in the Venus fort was scant. Besides the two Arkonides Krhest and Thora, there was Dr. Eric Manoli, the telekinetic Anne Sloane and the teleporter Tako Kakuta of the Corps of Mutants of the New Power, as well as Lt.-Col. Freyt, Capt. Rod Nyssen and Lt. Conrad Deringhouse, three former officers of the US Space Force, all of whom were living in the widely scattered caves.

All of them had pursued productive activity in the past five weeks and had contributed to the exploration of the forgotten Venus outpost. Only the three officers had felt somewhat superfluous when the others were talking about things they knew nothing about. They were neither familiar with Arkonide ideas nor did they have the advantages of an actual mutant. They were nothing but normal human beings whose healthy bodies and minds had enabled them to reach the Moon with a primitive spaceship from Earth.

But on June 12 something happened that changed all that. It had been exactly on Lt. Col. Freyt's birthday.

"What would you like for your birthday, Freyt?" Rhodan had asked good-naturedly.

"To become an active member of the New Power, sir!" he had replied. "And that applies to my two fellow officers, too. We feel a little left out."

"And what would you like to do?"

"We would like to fly, if possible. Although we are only familiar with conventional machines of our own technology."

"Those I cannot give you, Lieutenant Colonel. But would you care to take a closer look at the *Good Hope?*"

That had been Freyt's birthday present. The three officers were taken on an all-day tour of the spaceship by Khrest and Bell. After that, Rhodan gave them an intensive hypno-training course.

They literally learned in their sleep how to fly the Arkonide machines. They had been asked to lie down on low cots. Their arms, legs and brains had been connected to the senso-psychological teaching machines, after which they had been left to dream intensively monitored dreams, during which they were piloting Arkonide spaceships of all classes from one star system to another. Away from danger, they learned to carry out the most difficult maneuvers and to repair damage in-flight. The positronic testing machine automatically issued the results of its continuous checking operations. Incorrect handling became less frequent and it had been just 3 days since Lt.-Col. Freyt had announced to Perry that the three officers had fully mastered the solo piloting of the *Good Hope*.

A test flight afterwards had proved it. Since then, Freyt, Nyssen and Deringhouse had received a well-deserved vacation.

They made good use of it by taking short trips into the jungle of Venus. Around noon of July 7—they still figured time here according to an Earth

calendar—the three quickened their steps on the return from a trip when they suddenly saw the *Good Hope* rising up. Deringhouse saw the ship first.

"They wouldn't go home without us!"

"I am aware of Rhodan wanting to return to Earth. For two days now he has been sitting with the Brain holding clever conversations."

"Then I would like to know the meaning of this. I hope the Arkonides aren't pulling any smart tricks!"

"You mean Thora and Khrest want to escape," smiled Freyt. "You're a hothead, Deringhouse. The Arkonides know very well the limits that have been set for them, so don't look for trouble before you see it. Maybe we could hurry a little, if that would pacify you."

Half an hour later they reached the rampart of the fort. All of the controls of the defense weapons were located in the big dome.

Freyt took one look and convinced himself that no ships were within the atmosphere of Venus. The observation range extended as far as the south pole. Deringhouse's suspicions suddenly did not seem so farfetched. Yet, as the lieutenant started to speak, two blips suddenly shot across the observation screen.

"What the devil was that?"

"Captain! Get a fix on those objects so that we can follow them," shouted Freyt, and Nyssen obeyed his orders. Shortly afterwards, the tracking screen had caught the two space interceptors and regardless of what complicated maneuvers they attempted, they couldn't escape it.

"They are exceedingly small ships," observed Deringhouse. "They have nothing to do with the *Good Hope*. We should call Khrest."

Freyt had already done so. Seconds later, the Arkonide came in on the televisor. "You called, Lieutenant Colonel?"

"We are in the observation dome, Khrest. Could you come up right away?"

"Is it urgent? I have something else to do."

"We discovered two flying objects which evidently do not belong here. They shot low across the mountain and then pulled up sharply. Their current altitude is 14,000 kilometers."

"You must be seeing ghosts, Freyt. The alarm system would catch every foreign ship and report it. There is nothing that can advance as far as this mountain without being recognized."

"Please have a look for yourself!"

Freyt stepped aside so that Khrest could see the tracking screen through the televisor. The men recognized a barely noticeable twitching in Khrest's face. "I'm coming right away," said the Arkonide.

He came up in the express elevator and immediately dashed for the controls of the defense screen. "I'm ready to fire, Lieutenant Colonel. The screen is reinforced. Contact the strangers and threaten them with immediate destruction if they refuse to follow our orders!"

Freyt fidgeted nervously with the radio and waited several seconds for it to warm up. But before he could speak, the loudspeaker afforded the men in the dome a heated dialog for which they were totally unprepared. Rhodan and Bell were communicating on the same wavelength, since that was how the Arkonides of 10,000 years ago had designed the system.

". . . I'll just turn around immediately, then, old boy! I am in no mood to be shot down by Khrest."

"It's too late to turn back. You've already been

spotted. I suggest you try to communicate with the ground personnel. Perhaps they can be dealt with."

Initially it did not look that way, because Freyt, Nyssen, and Deringhouse were literally speechless. Even Khrest had to fight his surprise before he could say anything.

"What's going on, Rhodan? How did you get hold of those Fantan models?"

"Fantan models, he says," Bell burst in. "I told you so when I recognized the spindle-shaped bodies."

"Nonsense! What you see here, Khrest, are genuine Arkonide pursuit planes. Dig into your storehouse of memories and see how your forefathers built such things 10,000 years ago."

Khrest immediately grasped the implications. "You have discovered the planes in the fort. Of course, Rhodan, if that is so, it fits. The spindle shape was copied from us by the Fantan people only 2000 years ago. Where did you find the machines?"

"Here inside the mountain. There are four more. And all of them are armed to the teeth." Perry Rhodan laughed.

'You blew the alarm, didn't you, Khrest? Otherwise we might have to take our chances with a test of power."

"Do not joke around with such things, Rhodan. You can destroy whole planets with the weapons of a space interceptor. The Arkon rocket bombs, after spontaneous combustion, cause all heavy elements above the atomic weight of 80 to erupt into an atomic fire. In addition, the live warhead can be specifically guided toward a certain element to create a holocaust thru an atomic chain reaction."

"That may very well be," retorted Rhodan. "However, you may be reassured. We do not have the bombs

on board. That does not keep us from carrying them on our next flight, though. I've had an idea in the meantime."

Rhodan did not elaborate about his idea prior to landing. Bell had to return his ship to the hangar and fly the *Good Hope* to the fort. Rhodan took his little marvel directly there and landed it immediately next to the entrance of the fort. While he briefed Khrest on how he had discovered the six space pursuit planes, the three officers turned their attention to the machine itself. At last what they had always dreamed about had come true here on Venus.

"How do you like it, gentlemen?" inquired Rhodan.

"It's the answer to a space pilot's dream, sir."

"Too bad you've just had your birthday, Freyt."

"It sounds as if the spaceships could be given away."

"Not exactly. But I'll compromise, Lt.-Col. You and Deringhouse attend another hypno-training course—specifically as applied to these little flit-abouts. After that you can be their guardians by order of the New Power."

Freyt's eyes shone with pride. "Thank you very much, sir! You may depend on us."

"That's understood," nodded Rhodan seriously. "I need a fleet that is ready to fight. I want it small—but extremely fast and invincible. You know that thru the incidents of the past few months in our solar system a number of intelligent beings have taken notice of us. The first few attacks we were able to counter. There will be greater ones to follow. If we are to persevere and survive, we too must mobilize. Yesterday's fighting power may not be good enough tomorrow. Here comes Bell with the *Good Hope*. You will fly back with him to north hangar immediately and have him show you the location. Familiarize yourself with everything that you

come across. Tonight we shall discuss the new hypno-training course. I suggest we start in about 24 hours.''

Reginald Bell took the three officers aboard and took off again toward the North. Khrest and Rhodan turned toward the entrance of the fort. When they opened the gate, Thora came toward them. Rhodan got the impression she had been waiting for them there. She seemed reserved and cold; she passed the two men and went over to the space interceptor.

''The machine is from one of our old battle ships, isn't it?''

Khrest nodded. ''Rhodan found it. Six altogether.''

''Salvage goods, or what do you humans call it?''

''What do *you* call it?'' retorted Rhodan. He sensed the criticism.

''Stealing,'' said Thora harshly. ''We call it stealing, Perry Rhodan. And after having become acquainted with human beings I know that you have a similar code of ethics. Surely you know that you are a thief. In the eyes of other human beings as well as in the eyes of the Arknoides. Where is your pride?''

''I have only very little left. You robbed me of most of it. You alone, Thora. But what's left of it I intend to keep. I need it, if I am to save humanity.''

''You talk of saving humanity and completely forget about the galaxy.''

''The galaxy will have to wait until there is order in the Solar System. A great undertaking must always begin at the bottom. Without a sound foundation, even the most beautiful tower will crumble.''

''And the foundation is the people, right? Four billion ignorant people. Do you think they are strong and mature enough to support an entire island of the universe?''

''Young enough, Thora. It all comes down to youthfulness, the available reserves of vitality. Maturity

comes slowly. What drives you to continually get back to that subject?''

''Because I have asked myself if I am still the commander. Already the name of my ship has been changed to *Good Hope*. That is a Terranean name.''

''But it is a nice name and sounds hopeful. Don't you like it?''

''I am asking myself if I am still in charge of it,'' Thora insisted.

''That you are.''

''But as a captive. And the name *Good Hope* remains an Earth name, even if it does sound beautiful.''

''The picture of the Arkonides has changed. You have both become more sentimental than your pride permits. And especially you have become weaker. Your 'Great Imperium' is dwindling. How much hope do you have left, Thora?''

She did not answer.'

''Say something, Khrest!'' demanded Rhodan. ''Say one final word to clear it all up! Keep your Arkonide pride but please—try to have reason prevail!''

''The galaxy is one great chaos,'' declared Khrest. ''Our Imperium is at an end, I believe. Inhuman races lay waste to the cultures which we have founded and each year are coming closer to our core. The Milky Way needs a new ruler. We recognize the threatening development thus far. I recognize also, Rhodan, which role you might play. I am just not certain whether you would be willing to do it.''

''Which role would that be?''

''You are a humanitarian. You love these four billion people and would do anything for them. You would even let them rule the entire galaxy. Only—from ruling to dominating is but a small step.''

"You have a good point there, Khrest. But that does not let you out of making a decision. You have to throw in a small pinch of trust. None of us can make any prophesies. It is sufficient if all of us are willing to do our best."

"Are *you* willing, Rhodan? Are you willing to let the others have what's theirs, what is due them based on their right to freedom. I want to speak clearly and openly and let this be my final word, as you have asked me to. Humans and Arkonides are similar in nature. It would always be to our mutual disadvantage if one of these days a totally subhuman intelligence would take over the control of the stars of this system. Fate has brought Arkonides and humans together. If you are willing, Rhodan, to fight for all of us and to utilize human energies for the good of the whole galaxy, you have my confidence."

"I am willing."

2/ INVASION ALERT

Two days later.

Storms raged across the northern hemisphere of Venus, whipping rain and cloud formations deep into the valleys and causing rivers and lakes to swell and overflow their embankments. Between the never ending flashes of lightning from the contending storms there streaked identical trails of mathematical linearity: five spaceships in takeoff.

After space pilots Freyt, Nyssen and Deringhouse had completed their special hypno-course, Perry Rhodan gave orders for close formation maneuvers.

Communication between the five pilots was unusually gratifying.

"It's hard to believe what these birds can do," remarked Nyssen. "And when you consider that they were built more than 10,000 years ago, you can only say that our own engineers should get their tuition fees back."

"No panning of professional groups allowed," admonished Bell with playful seriousness. "Without the hypno-training course, your review flight would have drowned out today, Captain."

"Enough of that," commanded Rhodan. "We are leaving the Venus atmosphere and are moving across the north pole 120,000 kilometers away from here. Line up for a chain formation and pay attention to braking and turning signals."

Thirty seconds later the five machines were out of the Venusian thunderstorm, which was still raging below. Before them glittered the velvety-smooth universe, seemingly revolving around the white sun. Transmis-

sion of communications once again was normal so that even weaker stations were audible.

In all five of the space interceptors Terra's call for help was clearly received. In all five of the space interceptors the pilots realized that Rhodan's last order had been unnecessary.

". . . asking immediate return. By order of John Marshall, this is the New Power calling. We are calling Perry Rhodan! Oval spaceships, crew apparently consisting of Mind Snatchers, have landed on the Moon, according to information received from space station *Freedom 1*, and have shortly thereafter started up again and disappeared into space. Renewed approach is to be expected. Mutant Corps simultaneously reports new and suspicious changes in exposed persons. Additional details are being broadcast simultaneously over secret wavelength AK 3. Rhodan, we request your immediate return. By order of John Marshall . . . This is the New Power calling. We are calling Perry Rhodan! Oval spaceships . . ."

Rhodan ordered their immediate return to the fort on Venus. In a tight loop, which only their automatic inertial compensators made possible, the space interceptors plunged downward and dove into the raging hurricane. However, energy impulses neutralized the weather in the immediate vicinity of the machines and they were able to land without damage.

Even in the fort the mood was tense. Khrest also had received the message from the Gobi and had advised the men to be prepared for an emergency takeoff.

"Alright", nodded Rhodan. "Let the men board. It is not necessary that anyone stay behind. And don't forget to take three space interceptors aboard. Come on, Khrest. I want to hear what else they can tell us on wavelength AK #3."

Rhodan and Khrest took the elevator to the lookout

tower. The Arkonide main receiver had already spewed out a tape. But Rhodan did not finish reading it after he had quickly caught a few unfamiliar names. Instead he plugged in his own transmitter which came on at faster than light speed, or instantly, because of its 5th dimensional impulses. Contrary to the usual radio transmissions where the sending of a message between Venus and Earth in their present position would require more than 12 minutes, instant communication was possible over the five-dimensional AK 3 wave.

"This is Perry Rhodan! Calling station Gobi! What do you say, Marshall?"

"Hello, sir! Thank God you are here! Did you hear our message?"

"Naturally! The *Good Hope* is ready for take-off. But now I want you to tell me what you have sent over AK 3 until now.

"I'll let you talk to Mr. Mercant. He's standing right here."

"Hello, Rhodan! Mercant here!"

"Good afternoon! What's going on?"

"Two days ago, Kaats of the Federal Criminal Police called me up. For almost a year he has been after the gangster syndicate 'Bluebird', without even so much as having discovered anything besides their mysterious name. Now finally he is on their trail and he insists that one of the three most important figures calls himself Clive Cannon and has a luxury apartment on Michigan Avenue in Chicago."

"That sounds very interesting. But I want to point out that the New Power has no intention of mixing into politico-economic criminal cases."

"Why do you think I am telling you this, Rhodan? Cannon was discovered quite by accident by an FBI man and it is this accident that I think will interest you.

Cannon had owned a well-trained German Shepherd dog. Since the beginning of the week, this dog no longer acknowledges him. That in itself is not too significant. But they had been watching Cannon. He had long been known in social circles as a seemingly serious-minded businessman and some of his habits and connections were known as well. Colonel Kaats says that Cannon is no longer the same man.

"So you claim that he has been taken over by the Mind Snatchers?"

"We are almost certain. We shall continue to keep the syndicate under observation. If it is indeed in the power of the M.S., then a shift of economic and political interests must follow. Because extraterrestrial invaders will not restrict themselves to purely criminal acts."

"What do the other names in your message mean?"

"They are merely names of suspicious persons which we shall check out. I am convinced that the M.S. are intelligent enough to go primarily after our most influential personages. That begins with the president of the United States."

"Have you notified the world powers, Mercant?"

"Not yet. I don't want to be presumptuous and make that decision."

"In that case I am giving you the order! Thru the International Intelligence Agency you have the best connections to the defense centers of the Eastern Bloc and the Asiatic Federation. Contact Kosselov and Mao-Tsen immediately! Make it clear to all nations on Earth that they must look for one another, because our best friend today can turn into our worst enemy tomorrow. But mainly I want you to mobilize the Mutant Corps, insofar as they have completed their training. I want you to take over the command temporarily!"

"Thank you, sir! I have already made suggestions accordingly and have worked out the details as to how to deploy our people most advantageously. However, I want to remind you that, desptie our so-called superhuman capabilities, we are small in number. At the most we can handle only 6 or 7 people. Yet the attack front of the enemy ranges over the whole population and across the whole planet. In addition, only our telepaths are able to instantly recognize those who have been invaded by the M.S. We need a detector, Rhodan."

"I know", he said pensively. "The Arkonides have blessed us with plenty of instruments but not one of them is the kind we need for this situation."

"Don't you have a brainwave detector? I mean those little machines with which Bell and Kakuta had searched for mutants in Japan."

"Those things only locate abnormal brainwave patterns, which have been proven to exist also among us humans. We couldn't even determine among the mutants which type of paranormal ability they possessed. No, Mercant, those machines would not be of any help to us."

"We could perfect them."

"I am honored by your faith in me," said Rhodan with sarcasm. "But do not mistake me for the Almighty! I'll see what can be done."

"Do you have an idea?"

"A hope. No more. But we shall investigate every possibility and leave nothing untried. For this I shall need your help."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Go to Kaats and tell him that he must leave Clive Cannon alone. I want him to stick strictly to surveillance without being seen."

"I shall try to convey this to him in a diplomatic way. I hardly think he will accept orders from you."

"That's your problem, Mercant."

* * * *

Reginald Bell reported the *Good Hope* ready for takeoff. But Rhodan advised him to wait. It was typical for the Chief of the New Power to spend time on seemingly unimportant details.

"What a set of nerves he has!" groaned Dr. Manoli and thereby voiced everybody's sentiments.

Two hours later, Rhodan finally came aboard. He carried a chart with a stack of punched cards, positronic graphs and formulae which he put down without saying a word. He did not breathe a word about his work with the Brain.

"Are the space interceptors on board?"

"Yes, sir," nodded Freyt.

"OK!" Then we can start, Bell. I hope you don't need more than three hours."

Reginald Bell switched on the H-reactors. The *Good Hope* accelerated slowly to 10.2 km/sec and then shot with an absolute thrust impulse of 800,000 tons into outer space. Then she accelerated to 500 Gs. Nevertheless, they did not come close to attaining the speol because of the short distance between Venus and Earth, although Reginald Bell pretty nearly fulfilled Rhodan's demands for a lightning-quick flight.

After an hour of flight, those detection instruments were turned on which registered speeds faster than light, and which, thru their five-dimensional impulse arrangement, would not be recognized by possible attackers in the ordinary universe. The disadvantage of such an observation was that only limited sectors of space could be surveyed, whereas vast areas

which could be sighted in a straight line in four dimensional space could not be detected. For this reason, the conventional radar observation, which worked with only a few minutes delay over the actual distance, was employed concurrently.

Rhodan's orders proved correct. Where the M.S. showed up and disappeared at will, a renewed attack could be expected at any time.

At nearly top speed—when Bell was ready to switch to increased braking power—the radar instruments indicated the presence of two oval spaceships.

"M.S.!" shouted the men in unison. "They are headed for the Moon."

"That could be coincidence. It might just as well be that they are flying to Earth. Take the Arkon-detector, Bell!"

Almost simultaneously, search probes flashed thru hyperspace, reaching for the roughly located targets. Within just a few seconds the probe beams found their opponent. Contact-reaction cells guaranteed that the guide probe would not let the two M.S. spaceships out of its grasp no matter what escape maneuvers they might attempt.

"Distance: 25 million km from Terra! 44 million km to the M.S. spaceships."

"What is the distance between the M.S. and Terra?"

"Almost 18 million."

"That's all? Give me the map please!" demanded Rhodan.

Above the control panel a red light came on.

"Angle between M.S. and Terra exactly eight degrees, 45 minutes, and 30 seconds," declared Bell. "The M.S. are almost heading straight into us, since they are coming from the other side. Their speed, however, is a little slower than ours. They have already started to slow down."

"Estimates do not help us."

"It's hard to say in advance what the enemy is going to do. At the moment he's going at normal speed and apparently feels undiscovered. But as soon as he's spotted us he can be expected to renew his acceleration. You know from experience how rough they are with their inertials."

"We're not taking any risks. Hold for 10 minutes at positive acceleration. Even if we shoot past Earth. Freyt!"

"Sir!"

"I want you, Nyssen and Deringhouse to get ready for takeoff! Full weapons for all three machines."

"One rocket bomb with atomic warhead is already on board, sir. The equipment for the rayguns is ready to fire."

"Very well. You are acquainted with the situation. My plan is to catch both M.S. ships before they reach Earth. The *Good Hope* will keep going without diminishing her speed as long as possible. As soon as we cut back, however, you and your interceptors will leave the mother ship and fly with renewed speed ahead. Fasten yourselves down well against the pneumo-mats, because you will undoubtedly have to slow down by as much as 500 G when you reach your destination. The antigravity projectors may not be able to blanace that completely."

"I have been trained for 20 G plus, sir."

"That's good! But hardly good enough for Arkonide acceleration effects. I can only adivse you to watch out and not overdo it. As soon as you see that the antigravs cannot keep up, you must reduce the braking power. I hope you destroy the enemy, but it's more important that you and the three space interceptors get back safely and all in one piece. You're too valuable an asset, gentlemen."

"Yes, sir!" replied the three officers and signed off.

* * * *

The action went like clockwork. At least in the beginning. According to Khrest's briefing, the Mind Snatchers had an inferior warning system, but mainly their detection devices barely reached as far as 10 million km. The *Good Hope* would soon have to slow down in order to let the little interceptors go ahead, since these, with their low degree of reflection, had the best chance to move up close to the enemy without being discovered.

And they simply had to approach unnoticed if they expected even the slightest chance of success. The strength of the M.S. was their powerful defense shields, which they were able to put up around their ship within but a few seconds. An Arkonide raygun would be powerless to do much against that. The other advantage of the M.S. was their enormously quick manueverability. As soon as they knew that one of their underhanded attacks had been discovered and was therefore doomed to fail, they would then seek their escape in flight.

Which did not serve the purpose of the humans. An escaped M.S. would return. Sometime, from somewhere. And again he would have the element of surprise on his side.

"Hello, Lt.-Col. Freyt! Report when you are clear!" Perry Rhodan called out.

"All three interceptors clear for launch."

"Very well! Start them up! Increase spped as discussed. In 20 seconds the *Good Hope* is going to pull back. By that time you must be out!"

Three tiny gray dots disappeared in space in a straight line as Reginald Bell activated the jets to effect

a slow down. In only a few seconds the reflections on the shiny metal surface of the space interceptors stopped registering on the observation screens. A second detection ray searched for it and made them visible via the fifth dimension.

Direct voice contact with Freyt was established over the AK 3, without this being recognizable in the four-dimensional continuum.

Perry Rhodan would supervise every phase of the impending confrontation and, if indicated, announce any changes in his strategy.

"Correct course by two degrees starboard!" came the next order. Bell was a little surprised, since he had thought that he could fly the *Good Hope* home according to his own good judgment. But apparently her course still played a role in Rhodan's plans. So he obeyed without contradiction.

Most men on board sensed what Rhodan had in mind by changing course. But their suspicions were confirmed when the chief called Freyt.

"Stay on the exact course, Lt.-Col! We have changed course on the *Good Hope* by two degrees and will therefore show up six million kilometers away from your rendezvous with the M.S. In addition, we'll soon proceed comparatively slower so that the attention of the enemy will be directed toward us with certainty. That way, your chances to approach without being spotted are greatly increased. Again, good luck!"

Another 48 minutes went by, when a certain maneuver by the M.S. indicated the *Good Hope* had been discovered.

"Now, just keep your chin up, lad!" said Rhodan, addressing Bell. "We'll go on without any further course correction. The speed reduction also remains constant. From the enemy's point of view, we are

heading straight for a point on the other side of the Earth. If we continue like this on our course, he'll have to be convinced that we have not discovered him!''

Shortly afterwards Freyt issued his orders and the crew of the *Good Hope* listened in on super-wavelength AK 3.

''One degree spread! Nyssen aft, Deringhouse starboard. Nyssen 2G increase in acceleration! Deringhouse decrease acceleration by 2G. You, Conrad, take on the first one, in case I miss him. Rod, you take on the second one.''

''OK! Got it!''

The string of space interceptors fanned out. Due to the altered acceleration they now flew in oblique echelon formation. In the lead was Capt. Rod Nyssen, who had to dive past the first enemy spaceship in order to take on the second, before it was alerted by comrades on ship #1.

The M.S. held to their minor course correction. Apparently it had been a natural reaction to the appearance of the Arkonide space ship. Since Rhodan, however, had stubbornly stuck to his course, the M.S. were confident and stayed on their Luna-Terra course without altering their rate of deceleration. The three space interceptors, on the other hand, thru their continuing acceleration, had nearly reached the speed of light. For the stabilization of the gauges, which were drifting toward infinity, the galactonauts had sprayed an additive into the starter jets in order to purify the particle spray. They developed a speed which no living being in the Solar System had ever before thought possibel.

The enemy had not counted on such a sudden attack.

At the agreed-upon distance of 2 million kilometers, the space interceptors opened fire with their ray weapons. At the same time Nyssen and Freyt released their atomic space torpedoes.

The M.S. missed their chance to activate their powerful energy shields. When they discovered the flash of the rayguns it was already too late for them. The deadly beams approached them with the speed of light.

Both ships distintegrated almost simultaneously in a burst of pure energy.

The three galactonauts did not have time to worry about this fiery drama before them. The interceptors themselves were in danger. Minute by minute, their ever-increasing speed carried them closer to the edge of the raging inferno.

Immediately after the firing, they had to discontinue all acceleration and change course, during which a constant lateral pressure occurred for more than 15 seconds.

The three galactonauts lay stiffly in their pneumomats and instinctively counted up to 15. Only when they reached that point in full consciousness did they feel certain that they had survived it.

"Reduce speed!" Perry Rhodan's order suddenly boomed thru the pressurized cabins. "Well done, gentlemen! Get together and decide on a mutually agreeable course to return to Earth as soon as you have reached a tolerable reentry speed. We'll meet in lunar orbit where we'll haul you back in."

The men on the *Good Hope* got ready for a restful nap, when the hyper-detector suddenly came on again.

"What the devil is that now!" groaned Reginald Bell.

"Without doubt a flying object," commented Khrest. "It comes from exactly the same area which the three interceptors just inundated with energy. Apparently we are dealing with an M.S. lifeboat. These crafts are even smaller than our own interceptors and have room for a crew of 10 at the very most."

"That is impossible. Our attack destroyed everything that . . ."

"Your excitement is unnecessary. This craft is as good as unarmed. It cannot hurt us."

"That's not the question, Khrest! The question is how anyone was able to escape at all."

"They would not have had enough time to escape from one of the ships," remarked Perry Rhodan.

Khrest nodded. "That is true. I assume the lifeboat had been released earlier to carry out a special task. Please, let's pursue it awhile longer. We can afford to now."

Khrest's suggestion was accepted.

The tiny lifeboat of the Mind Snatchers had set course for Luna. Rhodan contacted Freyt again. The three interceptors returned on a radial curve of 800,000 kilometers and after 90 minutes reached the prescribed orbit, just ahead of the Arkonide spaceship.

"I estimate, Freyt, that you are the closest to the ship."

"Yes sir."

"Then begin the pursuit. Please, no attack! Such a fly can always be caught, as long as it does not fly directly toward Earth. I want exact coordinates of the landing area."

"Very well, sir! What about Nyssen and Deringhouse?"

"They can come in. We'll open the locks."

The guard over the M.S. boat was doubled. In addition to the Lieutenant-Colonel, the hyper-detector was also on its heels. The men in the ship as well as Thora followed every movement of the enemy with great interest.

Freyt approached it with great speed.

"Careful, Lt.-Col! We have to count on the M.S.

having built a permanent station on Luna. They might shoot at you from there."

"OK, sir! I'll be careful. Are you watching us, too?"

"Only to be absolutely sure. But that is no reason to get carried away."

Freyt laughed. "With all this equipment that I have here, there is hardly a chance to become careless. Everything has to be tested at least once. For instance, I have here an Arkonide wonder camera with 500 frames per second, with infrared and ultraviolet frequency ranges, with a chemo-physical positronic search brain and built-in developing mechanism for instant prints. Shall I bring you a finished film, sir?"

"The idea isn't bad. Get to work with the camera, then."

Lt.-Col. Freyt indeed brought back a usable film. The M.S. ship had disappeared near the equator on the backside of the Moon. Freyt's measurements pointed to the general area of the Mendeleyev crater near the 80th longitude. In that location there were astonishingly weak metal traces whose alloys the positronic brain of the camera described as "not occurring in a natural state."

"We have them there!" cried Eric Manoli. "We should pay them a little visit."

"We'll do that, although I don't want to risk any lives."

"Let's take robots! The M.S. will break their teeth on those, I think."

A shorttime later the *Good Hope* landed in the crater Anaxagoras, and unloaded a fully motorized contingent of robots who were given a limited scouting assignment. Their effective operating range was 6000 kilometers.

3/ THE EARTH PANICS

Some time later the *Good Hope* landed in a hornet's nest.

In this case, however, the hornet's nest was the territory of the New Power in the Gobi Desert, although it could hardly be called a desert any more. The wilderness and the solitude had disappeared. Besides the energy dome, which measured 10 km across, another 1000 square km of ground had been included in the plan for cultivation. Hundreds of experts and technicians were busy with an army of work robots engaged in the task of building the widely branched-out installations of a gigantic manufacturing industry from the ground up.

And the rose virtually came to the "desert". Artificial thunderstorms and rainfalls had put an end to the eternal draught. The natural oasis had expanded and daily attracted more Mongolian farmers who pitched their tents close to the borders of the New Power so as to share in the profitable wonders of a slowly and increasingly verdant paradise.

From a bird's-eye view it all looked very enticing. For a few minutes the Arkonide spacesphere hovered at low altitude above the hustle and bustle, on orders from Allan D. Mercant, who had unequivocally refused to permit a landing outside of the energy dome.

"You worry me," Rhodan had said. "I want to know what's going on in the land of the New Power and I see that good and positive things are happening. Or does it look any different when you get closer?"

"Land inside the dome, Rhodan! Since the M.S.

have shown up again I haven't opened the energy shield."

"Aren't you needed in your headquarters on Greenland?"

"I am needed everywhere. But I had sworn to wait here until you return. I am now going to have the energy screen deactivated. For three seconds at the most. Otherwise the risk is too great."

"We'll make it."

Reginald Bell's landing was a masterpiece.

On the landing strip they were welcomed by their closest coworkers.

Mercant pressed closer. With him was John Marshall and Dr. Haggard. Rhodan shook their hands. "Out with it, Mercant! What's the matter?"

"If you study today's World Press you will be able to find more than 300 suspicious cases of take-overs. Even if 90% of those are imagined, what is left would be more than shocking. It is the unreported cases that are cause for concern."

"In a word, you fear a mass invasion against the New Power!"

"That is obvious. The first M.S. who has taken control of an important politician or economist was informed about the significance of our nation. Whoever intends to rule the Earth must control the New Power. That is very clear."

"Admittedly so. That is why you have ordered a total curfew between the dome and the outlying areas."

"With what we've got, it is impossible to supervise our entire territory and to protect against any mind-snatching. So we restricted ourselves to the dome. As long as the main body remains untouched, we will always have a clean nucleus for the counterattack."

"I am grateful to you. What is going to happen next?

I gathered from our AK 3 dialog that you have already initiated some action."

"I have spoken with my colleagues from the East Bloc and the AF. They will submit our recommendations to their governments."

"That smells of bureaucracy."

"It is going to go faster this time. Space station *Freedom I* witnessed your battle with the two M.S. cruisers. The news of this great victory is already being broadcast this very moment by news agencies the world over. The danger is well known. In fact, it has already been propagated too much and been publicized everywhere, so that outbreaks of panic are increasingly difficult to suppress. There is nothing left for the governments but to declare an emergency state. But we will not get anywhere if we continue to distrust each other. Half an hour ago radio Singapore announced that a man in Manila kills his wife because the M.S. supposedly had taken control of her. Although neighbors seemed to think that their marriage was on the rocks. Who can talk of right or wrong today, if people are killing each other and then blame the M.S.?"

"We need a police force," said Rhodan. "I would like them to come from the ranks of your Secret Service: 500 men should be enough for right now."

"500?"

"500," said Rhodan with a faint smile. "What's 500 men for our problem and for those problems which await us in the future? We should not be so optimistic and assume that all stations can be covered by mutants. There are just not that many to go around."

"I shall get you the 500 men. It will take about a week. But I cannot guarantee there won't be any controlled ones among them."

"I don't expect that, either. Nevertheless, don't be such a pessimist. If only one of your 500 men is control-

led by the M.S. that would mean that the M.S. have already taken every five-hundredth one under their control. An improbable percentage, isn't it?"

"Permit me to revise your probability studies, sir!" said Mercant. We agreed that the M.S. proceed with logic, that they would not concern themselves with the uninfluential masses. Therefore, of a population of 4 billion, only about 2 million would be affected here on Terra. I would think that the M.S. would prefer secret agents in addition to politicians and economists."

"You are stubborn, Mercant," smiled Rhodan. "You insist on talking over a subject with me that won't be acute until a week from now. Why don't we postpone our dissertation for 7 days? Perhaps by then we will have changed our opinions."

"You mean by then you will have found a way to discover those who are possessed by the M.S.?"

"What we need is a clairvoyant in the corps of mutants. I merely harbor certain hopes and plans. Let's stay with the facts of the present! Everyone has his work cut out for him. It is your job to get me 500 reliable policemen. For right now, then, we shall proceed according to your already established rules and regulations. No unauthorized personnel are permitted to enter the energy dome. All new personnel will be staioned outside the energy shield. Only men and women who have been proven to be clean and reliable will be permitted to enter our Control Central. Keep me posted, Colonel! Whom do you want as your assistant?"

"A mutant, please."

"How about Marshall?"

"Hm, I like him. But I understand a little about telepathy myself. I'd rather have a teleporter. That would match up better with me."

"Very well. Take Tako Kakuta. What is your itinerary?

"To start off, I have to go to Greenland. Then to New York and possibly to Washington."

"Good. Have a good trip. If you have important news for me, please keep to the agreed upon times, if possible, so that we are not called away from our work too frequently. However, if it concerns matters impossible to postpone, I shall always be available."

While Mercant and Kakuta got ready for their trip, Rhodan straightened out his papers which he had brought along after his last meeting on Venus with the robot Brain.

"Gentlemen," said Perry finally, "it will hardly be necessary for me to make a detailed speech. You all know the situation. We are confronted by an enemy more malicious than anyone has ever known. We know neither his numerical strength nor his location. We don't know where the front line runs, only that it could run directly thru the middle of our camp branching out in a million different directions. An attack against the M.S. makes sense only in space where we can pinpoint their ships accurately. The battle on Earth itself will first have to be initiated. Before we strike back down here, it will be necessary for us to recognize the front lines. From a strategic point of view, two things appear to be needed at the moment: surveillance in space and enlightenment on Earth itself . . . Lt.-Col. Freyt!"

"Yes sir!"

"You will have a difficult job for the next few days. It will be absolutely necessary that at all times of the day and night a commando of two space interceptors patrol the universe up to 500,000 kilometers. You will do it together with Lt. Deringhouse. Only one of you can be off duty at any one time. Arrange this among yourselves."

"Yes, sir!"

"Thank you. I'll expect your takeoff within five minutes."

The three galactonauts left the room.

"Now to you, Doc Haggard! I'd like you to retreat to your laboratory and to think about where the M.S. might biologically be vulnerable to attack; purely theoretical, of course. If your laboratory is not sufficiently equipped, I want you to let me know immediately. Neither time nor material will be spared."

"I am honored by your faith in me, sir. But promise me please that I will not get too many of these jobs that are straight research. And research in such a relatively new area could take years to complete."

"I didn't give you a deadline, Doc. Is that clear? Anyway, be sure you continue to keep the mutants under medical supervision. Inform the gentlemen that they will shortly be transferred to Venus for a general final training course."

"I shall dedicate myself to theoretical matters and at the same time fulfill my obligations as Minister of Health. However, should you nevertheless press for a quick solution to the problem, I respectfully request that you supply me with the best equipment."

"And what is that?"

"A mind snatcher or his body. And in addition, a transformed human being."

"I'll see what can be done."

With that, Dr. Haggard was dismissed too.

Perry Rhodan and Reginald Bell were alone.

"And now to me," said Bell laconically. "Wouldn't it be better if we reinforced the patrol flights?" he suggested.

"You sound as if you want to join Freyt."

"Don't think because I am enjoying it. Freyt's job is the most important one of all. We have to prevent

further landings at all costs—otherwise our counterattack will come too late. And that has to be planned in minute detail, which will be time-consuming. You know, even you can't fight a whole world of M.S."

"Under no circumstances do I underestimate Freyt's job. But only he, with the aid of Nyssen and Deringhouse, can finish it. I need you for the new commando setup."

"Isn't that Mercant's job?"

"All he has to do is bring 500 men within a week, whose usefulness has yet to be determined. After 2 or 3 aptitude tests, there won't be many of them left. That is why you must get another 500 or 1000 volunteers together. Also within 8 days."

"How should I do that? I don't have a smooth running organization where I can get my recruits."

"You need volunteers. Volunteers from all over the world. We don't get very far with agents only, even if we admit that these lads are exceptionally bright. We need soldiers, technicians, scientists, jurists."

"You make greater and greater demands. I've told you before that my personal connections are not enough to . . ."

"As far as I am concerned you can place one-page ads in the newspapers all over the world. You can get together with Adams in New York. He does have the necessary connections."

"Then I am going to New York?"

"Among other places. Before that, you are going to Chicago. Michigan Avenue, to be precise."

"To see Clive Cannon."

"Quite right. Cannon is under surveillance by the Secret Criminal Police. If Col. Kaats took my recommendation to heart, nothing has happened to the chief of the gangsters as yet."

"And what am I supposed to do when I find Cannon?"

"Invite him for a stay in the Gobi Desert.

"He may not be interested."

"You don't think so? As one person transformed by the M.S. he will try his best to gain firm footing here."

"But he'll be suspicious. Even a less intelligent swindler is going to know the meaning of such an invitation. In this case I would be more in favor of an act of force."

"I am not telling you how to do it. But I need Cannon here. And alive."

"Who can I take along?"

"Who do you want?"

"John Marshall."

"Permission granted. Now go and pack your bags. Notify Marshall. But before you leave, I'd like to talk to you a minute."

* * * *

Perry Rhodan made off alone toward the positronic Brain which was stationed in the energy dome. He had with him the documents prepared by the sister brain on Venus. But these documents were far from being prepared in depth. The sudden departure from the old Venus fort had barely left Rhodan time to give the problem any concentrated thought.

In order to find a beginning, he inserted the punchcards and positograms into the machine. The first time around, his question was of a general nature. Even the Brain had to be guided slowly, step by step, with logical progression, toward the main problem. Not because it was possibly not capable of grasping more complex concepts in the shortest of time, but because it

was of the utmost importance how the questions were stated.

"How can I identify the mind of a person?" began Rhodan . . .

"Ask him who he is!"

"In this case we do not have a chance to ask," said Perry Rhodan. "The brain to be identified does not volunteer information."

"Every brain possesses a personal frequency pattern which can be measured thru bio-feedback methods," replied the Brain.

"It is our task," continued Rhodan, "to identify certain traits of a special group of brains. We are not concerned with one certain individual."

"That changes nothing in the correctness of my former reply."

Rhodan thought for a moment. This wasn't getting him anywhere. "The stimulus traveling from molecule to molecule emits a measurable field of energy. Measuring its frequency is made possible thru our bio-feedback equipment. Are you familiar with the mode of operation and construction of the equipment?"

"I am," the positronic robot replied readily.

"In this way, though, only deviations in the principle can be detected. We have no method of quality analysis. Thru the brainwave pattern alone it cannot be determined, anyway. That much we know. My question is: what can we use besides the energy waves?"

"We have no knowledge of anything else."

Again Rhodan was at the end of the rope. But he didn't give up. Not only had the positronic Brain been developed to amass certain knowledge and information, it also possessed the ability to think constructively.

Rhodan took a specific example of the positrograms which he had brought along and fed it into the machine.

"What is your answer to this?"

"The use of telepaths is recommended."

"Telepaths are not available in this case."

"Detection of brainwave activity can only be made via the use of bio-feedback, since every type of liquid is electromagnetic in character. Improving the receptor is recommended. Greatest possibility for character determination lies in modulation or patterning."

"Patterning into a carrier wave?"

"That exists already. When we try to identify a brain, we are dealing with the sender."

"According to that, the vble secret presumably lies in the fact that the Arkonide bio-feedback equipment operates on too narrow an energy range. Must we include the brainwave frequency of the carrier into their scope of resonance?"

"That is highly probable."

"What frequencies are we dealing with?"

The answer of the positronic Brain drowned in a shrilling of alarms. Perry Rhodan straightened up. His alert mind quickly switched over. Howling sirens were more significant than the most important answers of the Brain. The knowledge of the Positron Machine was not going to be lost. But every second that passed by was irretrievably gone forever.

Rhodan rushed toward the hall gate and looked around outside.

People hurried thru the sandy streets of the still rustic town. That in itself was not surprising, since an alarm in the restricted territory meant only that everybody had to get to his prescribed station where he had to await further orders.

Rhodan's station was in his office building, which, in turn, was the Control Central for the New Power. And only there the warning system could have been activated.

The distance straight across the street was only a stone's throw away. Perry avoided using his pocket transmitter and started running without losing a moment's time.

In the entrance to his office, Reginald Bell was expecting him in full travel regalia.

"Was this your idea?"

"Come on in. Out there by the gates it's pure pandemonium."

"M.S.?"

"That's what they say. At least that's *one* of their claims. They're causing a small revolution. In a case like this, you can never get a clear-cut answer."

"Are we dealing with a new invasion? Did the space interceptors let one of them get thru?"

"Nothing like that. If we are dealing with the M.S. they would have had to be here on Earth for days. Here, let's have a look!"

Rhodan stepped toward the television screen.

Bell made a viewing adjustment. The energy-activated eye of the directional antenna searched further aut and finally gave them a fuller view of the New Power area.

"Where did it happen?" asked Rhodan.

"Here," replied Bell and focused on an enlarged section. "Exactly northwest from us. Close to Post 37."

He did not have to say more. The picture spoke clearer than words.

Crowds of people thronged at the edge of the energy shield near the restricted area. And it was easy to recognize two groups that were hostile toward one another.

"Did you say 'revolution'?"

"That's it. Ras can tell you what else."

Rhodan turned around to face the African. "What happened?"

"I was outside making a routine inspection. Exactly at Post 37. In the second area, scarcely two kilometers from the border wall, the Harris Corporation is building 10 factory buildings for the manufacture of plastic freezer components and other standard parts for aircraft interiors. A group of people standing near the cement mixers were yelling at each other. Some of them were obviously arguing and were starting to raise their fists. Naturally I intervened and immediately was threatened physically. However, none of them got that far, because it seemed they could not get together among themselves. Several of them seemed less aggressive and asked me if there were really transformed people in the realm of the New Power. Others answered for me and stated emphatically that they had evidence to that effect. One technician pointed to two men and openly accused them of being transformed. He kept them at a distance with a gun when they showed signs of attacking him. People immediately surrounded the two accused, but at the same time backed away from them, except four men who obviously were some of their closest co-workers. But without any hesitation they were also accused and told to start saying their prayers. Then suddenly someone pushed me into the center with the other accused and I heard cries like 'He's one of them, too! Finish him!' I saw the fanaticism in their faces and knew instinctively that these illegally armed scoundrels were ready for anything. A shot came from behind me, injuring one of the cement workers next to me. After that I teleported straight over here."

"It's a good thing you did. Anything else—Bell?"

"Nothing," said Bell and pointed to the television screen. "But I'm afraid we already have had killings.

From what I can see, the two groups are approximately of the same strength. The group of attackers is obviously armed, which is why they are so confident and think they can afford to accuse anybody of being transformed."

Rhodan took the microphone of the house transmitter and switched on the intercom.

"Rhodan here! No general alarm condition necessary. All those not called out, remain in readiness. Standby crew of the *Good Hope*, get ready for takeoff! Calling Galactic Ground Control—come in please!"

"Lt. Deringhouse speaking!"

"You get ready too and leave the restricted zone in the space dome at the same time. Figure on a countdown in 5 minutes at the most. The energy shield can only be kept open for about two seconds, for security reasons. It is entirely possible that the so-called revolution out there is a staged maneuver by an enemy faction designed to catch us off-guard. That is why it is your job, Lieutenant, to circle over as small an area of the New Power as possible and report every suspicious movement on land or in the air."

"Very well, sir!"

Turning to Dr. Manoli, Rhodan continued: "You, Eric, are in command until our return. We will remain in uninterrupted radio and television contact with each other. Lt. Klein, you operate the defense shield, as long as you are here. So far, you have done very well. But don't depend on your own natural instincts. The positronic count begins at 'second' minus 60."

"Very good, sir."

"Bell, you come along with me."

"Right! But I suggest Arkonide spacesuits."

"Not necessary. What we need is psycho-beamers and gravitational neutralizers."

Reginald Bell obeyed. The mend equipment was

constantly in readiness. Also the Arkonide spacesuits, which Rhodan and Bell now merely used to reach the *Good Hope* without loss of time and which was stationed some thousand meters away.

The ship seemed like an empty cathedral to them. The steps of the hurrying men reverberated thru the corridors and echoed behind them. Thora and Khrest were in the control room. They were simply there like a part of the inventory. The *Good Hope* was a last vestige of home to them. The two Arkonides lived here and looked on with dubious interest when an emergency situation put the people in an uproar. Other than that, they played the spectator, so long as it did not affect them personally.

Thora, the commander of the once proud Arkonide cruiser, rarely made use of her inherited right. More and more, her life ended up divided between her proud past and the daily new situations that pushed her into contact with these humans from Terra.

Rhodan threw himself into the pilot seat and reached for the controls. The *Good Hope* came to life. She lifted off the ground and with easy acceleration floated higher. Two thousand meters above the Earth loomed the tip of the energy shield. "Rhodan to Lt. Klein! Altitude: 200 meters! I have put her on automatic pilot. Shift to positron-counter! Hello, Deringhouse! Maintain your altitude. At 500 meters, accelerate to 1 G! Give me the countdown over the transmitter, Lt. Klein!"

A mechanical-sounding voice counted down to zero. The take-off of the two ships and the lifting of the energy shield were now automatically locked in on a positronic setting which was monitored by Control Central. Nothing could go wrong now. At least nothing that concerned the liftoff. On Earth, however, the whole process had not gone without mishap.

The television transmitter, which had been focused on that critical spot, Post 37 in the northwest, had revealed the trouble.

The raving crowd, between whose fronts a narrow strip of no man's-land had been created, pressed close to the edge of the energy shield. One of the two factions had erected barricades and had leaned them up against the invisible wall. Two men had scrambled up on it in order to start a senseless demonstration.

The scaffolding collapsed when the energy shield was interrupted. But two seconds later the power returned to the dome, pushing aside all matter standing in its way. The clumsiness of humans prevented them from using this moment advantageously.

The new energy shield erected after a two second interruption had the effect of a catapult. The so-called "clean" energy, which causes no radiation effects because it operates strictly on a kinetic basis, hit them like lightning. People tumbling forward were thrown back, flung several meters through the air and sometimes landed hard on the ground. The scaffolding was similarly affected. Boards and beams fell on top of the pushing crowd and completed the chaos.

Bell translated what he saw on the screen into action.

"First of all we need paramedics!"

"You must search immediately for remaining M.S. bodies!" interrupted someone in the background. It was Khrest's voice.

"For M.S. bodies? You mean in *our* boundaries?"

"The scoundrels prefer darkness. The outer limit of the territory is not necessarily passable. It would certainly be possible that some of the M.S. hid their bodies in the vicinity."

"Would they have to?"

"One should not underestimate his enemy, I've heard the humans say," remarked Khrest and came

forward. "That is a rule which many diplomats and strategists of many an intelligence in the galaxy have found out. But all aphorisms hold true only within certain limits. Beyond those boundaries lie the exceptions, which in turn prove the rule according to another of their own maxims."

"Which exception are we talking about?"

"The natural personality traits of the Mind Snatchers are simply superhuman in the eyes of a Terran. Your race, therefore, will tend to consider the M.S. as tremendously superior from the beginning, and therein lies the subconscious readiness to capitulate. If an obstacle seems absolutely insurmountable, it is easy to concede defeat."

"Now you're talking more about Arkonide properties than of human," ventured Bell in an attempt to correct Khrest.

The Arkonide shrugged his shoulders doubtfully. "In your place I would not be so self-assured."

Rhodan wanted to get to the point. This was hardly the time to worry about the difference in human and Arkonide personality traits.

"You suggest then to see the M.S. in an objective light and to recognize their natural limitations."

Khrest nodded. "To overestimate them would be as great an error as to overlook their trickery. The M.S. are a greatly conceited bunch but heroism does not start with a capital H with them. They possess a strongly developed drive for survival which warns them of every risk. They are good with intrigues, very intelligent and very quick. But as I said before, they prefer their personal safety. You know, gentlemen, how the M.S. transform their victims. They come very close and then, without much ado, exchange identities. At the same time they always keep an eye on their own retreat. They need their own natural body close by, if possible,

although their transfer into the human body is essentially more difficult than the return into their own."

"So that is your explanaiton for wanting us to search in the vicinity for M.S. bodies?"

"Quite correct. If they feel safe, they would then look for a hiding place for their own body close to that of their new host. Generally, we can assume a radius of about 200 meters for such a place. Although in other cases they have been known to move as far as several hundred kilometers away along with their host bodies."

"After that, can they still return?"

"Only under extreme effort. It gets especially difficult when their host body's life is being threatened. His death would also mean certain death for them. That is so because the M.S. cannot jump from one person to another. He always first has to return to his own body, and this only as long as his host body is still alive. So that if you kill an M.S.-transformed person, the M.S. also dies."

"Let's hope you are right," said Bell in a skeptical tone.

"You have no reason to doubt my explanation," retorted Khrest. "I don't mean any harm. But once before you made a mistake when you looked at everything from an Arkonide perspective. You had maintained that a transformed person, whose self had returned into his own body, would go crazy.

"That goes only for humans and Arkonides between whose mentality there is a great disparity. So long as we judge only the M.S.'s themselves, you may depend on what I have just said completely."

The appearance of the *Good Hope* created a fair amount of excitement among the gathering of people at Post 37. The clear division between the two factions had been shattered even as early as the collapse of the

scaffold. Now their guilty conscience seemed to unite them once more. Because behind the Arkonide dome loomed quite a different kind of authority.

Rhodan landed the ship but asked Thora to keep it ready for takeoff. He then looked at Bell and winked at him. "Come on, Bell! But be careful with the neutralizer. Use only small, concentrated beams, and even those only when there is no other way out. I would not want to have a large area of our new construction to suddenly be without gravity. If all overhead loads should lose their supports, it would take us several weeks to clean up the mess."

"No problem, my boy," grinned Bell amicably. "I do not think we will have to use these things. Actually I carry them only as a safety precaution."

They stepped in front of the ship. The crowd had moved back a little and loomed there like a solid wall. Rhodan advanced toward them. Reginald Bell followed. "Thousands of strange faces!" he moaned as he walked on.

Rhodan was thinking the same. Most of the men had been drafted during their Venus expedition. A wave of reverence, mistrust and uncertainty met them. Some of them may have even harbored disloyal or deceitful thoughts. However, Rhodan and Bell just kept going without wavering. Even now, at 50 meters away from them, a mental duel began; even now, the two men of the New Power had to prove their authority which, on the basis of their position, they seemed to embody.

Perry Rhodan immediately went all out. He knew that there was no way he could overdo it now—it was either now or never. He did not stop when he reached the crowd. He kept going like a robot and Reginald Bell followed him with the same determination.

The wall moved back. No one touched the two and a narrow path opened up.

Then Rhodan stopped abruptly. "Who is your section leader?"

Silence. Rhodan addressed the first man at hand. "Lost your tongue?"

"Professor Morton, sir," stuttered the man and looked around uncertainly.

"I want to speak with Prof. Morton!" said Rhodan aloud so that everyone could hear it. "Please give him some room!"

There was a stir in the rear. Without interference they let the section chief pass.

"Good afternoon. I am Perry Rhodan. Tell me what is going on here."

"I cannot explain it, sir. The whole thing seems to be a misunderstanding or the work of a small fanatical group. I am quite willing to tell you what I know, but could you first give us a chance to look after the injured?"

"You have a hospital in the vicinity. Why hasn't anything been done?"

"We do not have the authority, Mr. Rhodan. I am asking you for your help."

"Send the people back to their stations, Professor. My questions can wait."

Morton passed the orders along. Hesitatingly, a few of them turned around pushing against those behind them. Bell grabbed one of them by the sleeve. "What is your name?"

"Brian," said the man meekly.

"Good Brian. You are responsible to see that in two minutes we have enough helpers to assist the injured. You may go. Hey, you! What's your name?"

"Schley, sir."

"Mr. Schley, you're responsible for the cleanup operations. Take as many men as you need to be finished in twenty minutes!"

The man disappeared with a hoarse "Yessir!" But not only he. Without exception, suddenly everyone was more interested in getting away. In no time the wide area was empty and Rhodan, Bell, and Professor Morton stood alone.

"That too is a weapon," grinned Bell, obviously satisfied.

"A psychological one," nodded Morton, smiling. "I owe you my gratitude. A few minutes ago it looked pretty threatening. It started a half hour ago. I . . ."

"No details, please, Professor. We have been watching everything pretty close from Control Central and from the spaceship. If today people accuse each other of being transformed by the M.S., it sounds pretty threatening, but the facts prove that it is purely a panic reaction. Or do you have reason to believe otherwise?"

"Absolutely not, Mr. Rhodan. I have said before that I considered everything to be a misunderstanding."

"You said it. But do you really mean it?" injected Bell.

"I don't understand you."

"If you really don't understand me, you are alright."

"Why shouldn't I be alright?"

"You see, Professor? A little while ago we were facing a fairly good-sized revolution. Now you minimize everything. Behind that could be the purpose of getting rid of us. You have been transformed, haven't you?"

Morton blushed profusely with excitement and couldn't immediately find the right words. "But that is absurd! Are you, too, supporting this damaging, creeping propaganda?"

Bell remained cool. "It is absolutely not absurd,

Professor. The M.S. are known to approach the most influential persons. At Post 37, that is you."

"At the moment, hardly, if I may say so with a little humility. If I really were an M.S., I would already have selected you—or better still, Mr. Rhodan—as a new host body."

"So you would have jumped across?"

"My human logic dictates that."

"Hm, what do you think, Perry? He seems genuine, don't you think?"

"I guess so. You have passed the test, Professor."

"Thanks a lot!" Morton visibly breathed easier. At the same time his face reflected bewilderment. "You have a strange way of checking people out. I would be interested in your method."

"As an M.S., you would never have thought of transferring from Professor Morton to Perry Rhodan. Because that is impossible."

They continued until they came to the energy wall and convinced themselves that there were only four cases of light injuries. Brian stood obediently by the medics.

"You see, I was right," said Reginald Bell gratified.

"More than that, my boy. You were going to arrest three top revolutionaries. Even that was not necessary. All this goes to show how serious the mood is, just as it might prevail among all humans. Insecurity, mistrust and the willingness to act on the spur of the moment. We don't have much time, Bell, if we are to preserve the world from chaos."

"Quite right," nodded Bell, from whose freckled face the smile had already vanished.

"I am happy to have met you, Professor," continued Rhodan and held out his hand toward Morton. "But do not consider the seemingly effortless settlement of the unrest in your section as evidence of our safety. Now,

as always, there is the possibility that there are M.S. among your men. It is just not feasible to question each and every one of them about it. Rather, I suggest you look for empty body shells. Before the day is done, I shall issue corresponding orders to all worker groups outside of the energy field. As soon as you have anything concrete to report, I'll expect your radio transmission. We shall be ready at all times for a counter attack."

* * * *

The *Good Hope* returned to the energy field. Lt. Deringhouse, who had not found anything suspicious to report during his surveillance from the air, made a simultaneous landing.

"Patrols are boring," said Bell consolingly. "But one of these days every routine activity is going to pay off. Do you have new orders for Marshall and me, Perry?"

"Everything remains the same, as discussed. First stop: Chicago at Cive Cannon's house. I need one transformed person and one empty body shell. In New York you will find Homer G. Adams, who will help you put together our police troop. I hardly believe that you will need any further details."

"We shall see. Goodby, Perry."

"The best of luck, my boy."

After Mercant and Tako Kakuta had left, Bell and Marshall also left their new home in the Gobi Desert. Whereas Rhodan sat in his office and thought to himself: I am staying behind. I, the man in the background.

Then he got up, stretched his body and went to the hall where the positronic Brain was waiting. The conversation was taken up exactly where it had ended when the alarm sounded.

"Modulation—carrier wave—total spectral range in angstrom units . . ."

"The old Arkonide detector merely determines such a brainwave pattern," explained the robot. "A telepath, however, reads thoughts. I suggest you build an artificial telepath."

And this artificial telepath would be the utterly perfect brainwave detector.

Rhodan remembered the cargo of the *Good Hope* which had brought from Venus the first worker robots. There were machines among them which simultaneously stimulated as well as supervised the work of their own. There were engineers among them whose talents ranged from mechanician to positronician.

Before the day was out they would begin work on design and construction of the first test model. Earth needed the telepathic detector or it would have to capitulate before the M.S.

4/ A MONSTER NEGOTIATES

Those who pass along Michigan Avenue during the daytime have to crane their necks in order to observe a piece of the sky peeking down between the skyscrapers. John Marshall lowered his head once more after having made his own observations about Chicago in general and Michigan Avenue in particular. Not far from the intersection of the latter with Congress Street, they had gotten out and were now approaching the hotel by the same name with obvious reserve. Reginald Bell was registered at the Hotel Congress under his real name, while John Marshall—even though he had taken a room on the 7th floor right next to Bell—called himself Joe Linker. Officially they did not know each other.

Balconies in panoramic arrangement lined the side of the hotel facing the courtyard. Although these were individually separated by tall and heavy dividers with frosted glass panels, it would not be too difficult to climb over such a barrier.

The windows in the neighborhood were dark. John Marshall took a chance and climbed in with Bell and pulled the drapes shut.

"There, now you can turn on the light." Bell switched on the light from the floor lamp next to his armchair.

"What about Cannon?" ventured Bell as Marshall was obviously taking his time.

"I have not contacted him."

"What's that?"

"Please reserve your opinion for later, Bell! Cannon is living in what amounts to a fortress. Whoever wants

to get to him must pass thru three lobbies and each one of them means running the gauntlet."

"Am I supposed to listen to a batch of excuses tonight?" interrupted Bell. "What good are you as a telepath, Marshall?"

But Marshall was unperturbed.

"Judging by what everyone around Cannon thinks, the man is in a double trap," he went on.

"Have you checked out his surroundings?"

"You know my job as a telepathist. For a trouble-shooter I have found out a lot. Probably that is more important than if I had talked with the boss himself."

"Let's hear it!"

"One hundred meters away from the Kreysky Building, here on our side of the street, is a basement bar. It is in this restaurant where the first undercover men started their operation. The police as well as those of the Bluebird syndicate. Occasionally they even sit together at one and the same table and talk."

"Secret deals?"

"Hardly. Both sides are loyal to their line. They play cat and mouse and aren't even sure if they recognize each other. I'd say they distrust each other instinctively."

"And where does it get more interesting?"

"Inside the Kreysky Building, obviously. And surprisingly in the building next to it. At the street level, there are a number of small businesses. In the Kreysky there is a self-service store for soaps and cosmetics. Also a general sales agency of Mix-Centry."

"Those are the people who put their motors on everything that will run."

"Quite right. I have seen one-man cycles, motorboats and personal-size helicopter backpacks for the briefcase. I hope you not only observed but also looked

out for thought change processes. Mix-Centry's business could prove to be very interesting."

"How so?"

"I know from Adams that he is keenly interested in their stocks. Until now, the company is still firmly entrenched in the Kreysky syndicate. But as far as I know, our General Cosmic Corporation has already nibbled some of it away . . . But let's go on. In the adjoining building there are two stores, one an interior decorator, and the other handling fine pottery. I personally went by there twice so that I could observe details."

"Good, when you are fully familiar with the exterior, maybe then you'll be more interested in the fact that two female agents of the Federal Secret Police are employed in the cosmetic store. One is a supervisor and the other is a cashier. The manager on the other hand has only things such as Kreysky and Cannon in his head and holds an uncompromising position in regards to opposition. Even the manager of the Mix-Centry Sales Agency belongs to this category. Two days ago he unfortunately found himself compelled to hire a new man since his former co-worker had suddenly and unexpectedly been arrested by the police. Now the old man sits in custody awaiting arraignment. The new man is an agent of Kaats. However, the switch was so obvious that the boss became suspicious."

"Did he recognize Kaats' man?"

"Not really. He distrusts him on principle."

"Then he won't worry about it. How does it look in the other stores?"

"I have prepared a list, Mr. Bell." Marshall took out a piece of paper and placed it on the table. "In the first column are the names, in the second where they belong to the Bluebird gang or the police. After that follows

their employment status. You can see that I found suspicious persons on almost every floor. Especially in the office of the attorneys Smith & Smith next door."

"Hm, Kaats evidently couldn't gain access at Smith's. All 12 employees, however, sympathize with Cannon. I'm afraid that if we start knocking there we'll find ourselves deep in a wasp's nest."

Reginald Bell studied thelist thoroughly. Finally he carried the sheet to the fireplace, held it over a burning lighter and scattered the ashes.

"It seems we are dealing with several different groups which interpenetrate. One guards against forces on the outside, the other attempts to break thru to the inside and block from there. Kaats guards Cannon's every move. To kidnap him will be difficult."

"Why can't you get some support from Kaats?"

Bell brushed him off with a motion of his hand. "Dealings with the police are time-consuming and probably lead nowhere. Kaats is not Mercant. Kaats serves the United States of America and does not even sympathize with the New Power. He probably would only take advantage of any information Mercant could give him, other than that he is driven by ambition and wants to do everything himself."

"You mean he too would be upset if we took Cannon along with us to the Gobi?"

"Definitely, Marshall. So you might as well get the easy way out of your head! We have our orders from Rhodan. A combined effort with Kaats would mean that we too would have to weigh our interests."

"So we'll do it the illegal way."

"It is not a matter of rules and regulations but of saving the whole Earth from the M.S. Only one thing counts: to carry out Rhodan's orders."

"I agree completely."

"I hope so. After all, you have laid valuable groundwork which enables us to design a most promising plan of attack. I have the outline that we just etched into my noggin. In the future we want to make as few written notations as possible. Another question: is there any possibility that any of the people you observed have been transformed by the M.S.?"

"No. This possibility I would like to exclude. We know it positively only of Clive Cannon. It is my opinion that the M.S. have advanced on the largest possible front covering the whole Earth. However, their first invasion wave will have been pretty weak, so that they have to spread their ranks pretty thin. It would be sufficient that they occupy the key positions. In the Bluebird gang which is probably on the same intelligence level as the Kreysky syndicate, Cannon is in charge. All others are puppets and are only following orders."

"OK. Let's get down to business. You said that the adjoining building is especially suspect because of the more concentrated occupation by the gangsters. Have you noticed that the offices of Smith & Smith are on the same level as the headquarters of the Kreysky syndicate?"

"Of course. This puzzle fits together so well that we can depend with certainty on finding a path connecting the two buildings somewhere. The only question is, which end do we start at?"

"Both ends at the same time. Anyway, it is your job to find Clive Cannon. In the meantime I will see about Smith & Smith."

Although John Marshall showed up in the Kreysky building half an hour before the offices opened up, he had to wait, as two other gentlemen had gotten up even earlier than he.

At first it did not bother him, especially since this enabled him to concentrate on their inner life for awhile.

". . . I was here first. I'll be finished before noon . . . talk to Cannon personally . . . what his mood is, I have the recommendation of the Secretary . . . I'll threaten him with the GCC. Adams in New York buys everything he can lay his hands on. Even shaky undertakings . . . Nonsense! Cannon has to agree to the conditions. The Kreyskys should get off their high horse. If they do not want to be swallowed up by the GCC, they need everything they can get . . . even on less favorable terms . . . Naturally, it was late again yesterday!"

A purely financial problem seemed to occupy the mind of his neighbor.

The other man sat farther away. Marshall had difficulty reaching the flow of his brainwaves. Finally he got up and paced back and forth, acting totally bored. He was just scrounging thru a stack of newspapers when he made a good telepathicontact. And not only a good one but also a valuable one.

". . . this youngster looks to me like a junior executive. Grooming tiptop, must be influential if he shows up here . . . But he must be getting the money for his car from the old man . . ."

John Marshall did not feel exactly flattered. But here the point was not what other people thought of him. The next thinking process of the stranger proved it.

". . . Orders are orders . . . I wonder how Kaats is going to cover me. Peculiar method for carrying out an execution in a constitutional government . . . If only they don't search me too carefully!—Maybe the third time around I'll make it thru to the boss . . . This young man makes me nerous. Or maybe he *is nervous. Why doesn't he sit down? Of course, if Cannon is*

transformed, nothing can happen to me. Kaats alone can make the decision how to eradicate those beasts. Anyway, everything is locked . . . Nothing can happen to me . . . Nothing can happen to me . . . I should read too . . ."

"Excuse me, sir," said the police official aloud and reached for one of the newspapers. It looked as if Marshall had reserved them all for himself.

"Certainly, sir." John Marshall took the issue which he held in his hand just then and returned to his seat.

But he was unable to concentrate to do any reading. The man in the other corner was a police official. The man had orders to kill Cannon and was making his third attempt today to penetrate into the sanctuary of the Kreysky syndicate. Who knew whether Kaats ever had intended to cooperate with Mercant's wishes? In the long run it probably was too much effort for him to protect and guard a single transformed individual to that extent. A dead M.S. was a good M.S. And perhaps several hundred more were running around in the United States to whom he had to attend with the tools of the Detection Service.

Considering it in this light, Col. Kaats was obviously correct.

But Clive Cannon, until now, had been the only M.S.-transformed individual who had been identified with near certainty. Clive Cannon was therefore also too important a person to simply shoot and kill him.

John Marshall recognized clearly now that Bell had been right when he warned against a collaboration with the Secret Federal Police. The interests and plans of the New Power did appear to be somewhat dissimilar. Although Marshall found little consolation in admitting that now more than ever he was quite alone. He remembered that the contents of his pockets included several instruments of Arkonide origin that could pro-

tect him from great danger. Though he had to curtail their use as far as possible if he did not want to make himself suspect.

Additionally, it was important to change the original plan. Nobody was counting on an assassination. And Bell, who was going to look around this morning in the office of the attorneys Smith & Smith, did not have the slightest idea that the situation had changed. Consequently, Marshall couldn't completely go a new route. While the hand of the clock moved slowly toward the numeral nine, he tried to organize his thoughts and put some logic into them and was glad that he had been granted a reprieve by the calling of the first gentleman.

Five more clients arrived in short order, who, after a mumbled greeting, sat down and reached for the morning paper.

Marshall also made the rounds with each of them with a harmless visit but met with difficulty when he tried to sense the thoughts of those people who were sitting close together. The impressions became blurred. One of the five had to be sympathizing with the police official and also had to be informed about his orders. But who it was, Marshall was unable to detect. Not even thru some furtive glances as a sign of recognition did any of the people give themselves away. They had been well drilled and did not take any chances. Well, Kaats would have sent his best men for an act of such proportions.

"*Brown is next,*" a clear thought suddenly jumped at him. Brown had to be the police official.

And then the receptionist appeared for a second time to call Brown.

Marshall's nerves were ready to burst. The assassin was moving out of his range. He couldn't even follow him by sight anymore.

Would he now miss his opportunity?

If Kaats' agents were to shoot the M.S.-transformed man in his presence, it would mean a severe dressing-down for Bell and Marshall after their return to Gobi. And aside from that, it would be a decided victory for the Mind Snatchers, even if they were to lose an important position temporarily.

Kaats' plans simply had to be averted.

And Marshall had to keep his wits about him to prevent an inner panic.

The police official Brown could not have reached Cannon yet. As long as the first visitor had not come out, Brown would have a hard time to succeed with his plan in one of the reception rooms. If indeed he even got his shot off today.

Would he ever?

This last wishful thought Marshall had to strike. It was a nebulous thought on which he could not rely.

Then the door opened and the first visitor appeared with a taciturn and unhappy look on his face.

The door slammed shut.

Nobody called Marshall next. That is when he made a decision to act on his own initiative.

He got up and knocked. Without waiting for a reply, he entered. The lady behind the desk was all indignation and hostility personified.

"You can't go in unannounced. I must ask you to remain outside until it is your turn."

"It *is* my turn, Ms!"

"Please do not argue with me, sir! I have my orders. I suggest you try to follow our house rules. By the way, do you have an appointment? I could take a look to see if there is any sense in waiting."

"That was not only plain but also downright unfriendly, Ms.," said Marshall cynically, and daringly took the appointment calendar out of her hand. "I have as much an appointment here as death itself. Neither

death nor I can simply be shown to the door. Is this analogy clear enough?''

The receptionist's facial expression reflected her consternation. However, as one of Clive Cannon's closest associates, she belonged to that category of people who distinguish themselves thru intelligence and presence of mind. Alarm was the key word in her tumbling thoughts. To be sure, she was still hesitating. Braggards with impressive talk came to her regularly trying to get in. But she hesitated a little too long, so that Marshall urged her on encouragingly.

''Go ahead and press the button, Ms.! Quickly, if you want to save the gentleman's life.''

''Sir . . . !''

Marshall was about to stop her with another defensive motion of his hand as he had done the firstime but she was quicker. Nor did she announce her intentions thru any tell-tale thoughts, but instead acted promptly.

Marshall was staring into the end of a pistol.

''You are going too far with your jokes. As long as you have picked a macabre subject, let's finish the game your way! So! I want you to leave right now!''

''And the life of Clive Cannon does not interest you?''

''I think as long as you keep away from him he will be perfectly safe!''

''Correction, Ms.! It will be in danger as soon as Capt. Brown steps into your boss' office. And so that you know exactly to whom I am referring, Brown was the one just ahead of me. I only hope he is still in one of the two adjoining rooms. As far as I know, he does not have a direct introduction to Cannon, but merely a recommendation by some secretary. Have I expressed myself clearly enough to direct your attention into the right direction?''

''Just one moment!'' The lady got up and rushed

over to the nearest door. "Hello, Phil! Where is the last gentleman I brought in to see you?"

"I've just sent him over to the next building," answered a masculine voice in the adjoining office.

"Then go immediately to McPhan and let him wait! I have an urgent message for the boss. Under no circumstances must that man be seen first!"

Marshall heard chairs scraping and some flirtatious remarks. But the instructions were being carried out. Another door slammed shut.

"Hello, Bill! Excuse the interruption! The man who is with you is supposed to wait there for five minutes. The boss is busy with an important telephone call just now and cannot be disturbed at the moment."

"If the boss were on the telephone, I would know about it."

"The call is just coming thru the switchboard. So you know what to do."

The man the lady had addressed as Phil came out into the first reception room. "And now I hope you will explain to me what this is all about, Marge."

"Let this gentleman here do it. He owes me an explanation too."

"My name is Linker," said John Marshall with a slight bow. "Will you guarantee me that Capt. Brown will not get in to see Mr. Cannon?"

"My name is Steinberg," said the man named Phil, equally polite. "What can you tell us?"

"First answer me my question, Mr. Steinberg! Is Mr. Cannon safe for the moment?" Marshall already knew it from the thoughts of the other. He even knew that Cannon had been notified that something was amiss from Steinberg's desk by a red warning light and not to open the automatic bolt of his door until the possible danger had passed. Marshall knew all that. But here he could not act as the telepath that he was. He

had to ask his questions just as any other normal person would.

Steinberg smiled cynically. "You ask funny questions, Mr. Linker. Of course Cannon is absolutely safe. That is exactly why you must now take your time and explain it to us."

"Search Capt. Brown. You will find a pistol on him. And possibly even several. He has come here with the intention of killing Mr. Cannon."

"Hm, Brown is a police official, right? Though he did transact business with me representing a private firm. And not for the firstime today, either. How can you prove that he is a member of the police?"

"He not only belongs to them but also acts on their behalf."

"Mr. Linker, I would have thought you smarter than that. That means that the police are involved in murder. Officially, that is what you would have me believe."

"I will discuss further details with Mr. Cannon personally. You must admit they are important enough to justify it."

The cynicism in Steinberg's face increased steadily. "If you're trying to convince us of your innocence, Mr. Linker, I want you to know that you have already succeeded completely. I fear Mr. Cannon will neither see you today nor at any other time. But stay here for a moment while we have a look at Mr. Brown."

Steinberg issued orders to several different people over a desk microphone and shortly after that there was a veritable invasion. Five men came from the second reception room which they obviously had entered thru a side entrance. Then Capt. Brown was brought in. His thoughts already revealed that he felt he had been discovered. Yet outwardly he did not give himself away.

"Frisk these two men!" came Steinberg's orders.

Suddenly John Marshall saw himself being handled the same as Brown. In fact the search seemed to be even more productive with him. While the captain merely carried three common type firearms, one of them quite compact and hidden in the lining of the coat, they found instruments on the youthful Linker that they could not recognize but which, because of their unfamiliar shapes, seemed that much more threatening.

"Hm," interrupted the lady again. "I think we found us an interesting pair."

"I think so too. The two will, of course, never admit that they belong together. But we will give them a lot of time to think about it. Please explain these things, Mr. Linker!"

"The devil I will. That is my private property and doesn't concern you."

"We shall confiscate this private property until the boss makes further disposition of it. Knox, don't you have two separate and bulletproof rooms for these two gentlemen?"

One of the five armed guards grinned. "For such birds, anytime, Mr. Steinberg. May I take them with me now?"

"I protest!" exclaimed Capt. Brown. "You can't rob a man of his freedom just because he carries firearms while on duty for the government. May I point out to you that you place yourself in jeopardy and may expect to be punished accordingly? If there is anything you wish to accuse me of, do it legally! I am prepared to testify in any proper court of law."

"That I do believe," Marshall confronted Brown. "What the police sanctions, the attorney general will back up. But as for my being identified with what you stand for—that I'll correct as soon as I get out of here. I have the means and I also have the connections. All you have to do is take a look at that stuff on the table. These

worthy citizens here don't even know what they are, much less how they work."

The man with the machinegun who had been addressed as Knox, had grown more curious and was stepping closer in order to get a better look at Marshall's gear. He even reached for the neutralizer.

"You fool!" shouted Marshall. "Keep your hands off if you don't want to turn the whole building into a graveyard!"

Again this warning sounded so contrived that no one could be expected to take it seriously. But Steinberg remained cool.

"What are these things, Mr. Linker? Are they weapons?"

"Of course! They are firearms and my warning to Knox affects all of you. It's in your own best interest and mine."

"Explain that in a little greater detail."

"There's nothing to explain. I didn't come here to give you any lessons. Besides, these instruments are too expensive for your pocketbook."

"Did you come from somewhere on Earth?" Steinberg posed a leading question.

"Well, what do you know!?" retorted Marshall with a contrived irony. "We're beginning to understand. But keep racking your brains now! With your intelligence maybe some day you'll arrive."

"We are going to keep you here until you talk, Linker."

"That smells of blackmail! Possibly even false arrest and theft. Do you think Mr. Cannon would go along with that?"

"I think so."

"Absolutely not!" a voice suddenly rang out thru the loudspeaker. "Dismiss the men, Steinberg! Arrest Brown and send Mr. Linker in to me!"

"Right away, sir!"

From the way people acted, Marshall could see at once that none other than Clive Cannon had spoken. Within a few seconds the office had been cleared. Phil Steinberg made an inviting motion with his hand.

"Please, Mr. Linker!"

Marshall hesitated. "You forgot something!" he smiled and pointed to the neutralizer and the psycho-raygun.

"I don't know if Mr. Cannon would like it if you brought those things . . ."

"I don't mind, Steinberg, if Mr. Linker will let you bring the instruments and put them on my table," came Cannon's voice.

"Agreed," nodded Marshall.

Clive Cannon welcomed him like an old acquaintance.

"Have a seat, Mr. Linker!"

"In order to size you up more readily, Mr. Linker I've naturally been listening in on your conversation in the first reception office and am fully aware of what went on. The show, if you will forgive me for calling it that, was a little too serious for my tastes, so now I'd prefer to have a little discussion."

Marshall was trying to snatch a pause in their conversation in order to catch anything of importance in his unspoken thoughts. But he was disappointed if he thought he could recognize the M.S. transformed man at first attempt.

"On the other hand," he heard Cannon continue, "what I heard was not only mixed up but also very strange. Can you give me a brief explanation for all this?"

Cannon's eyes were glancing at the neutralizer and the psycho-gun. In his mind halfway definable concepts were forming and Marshall saw in that the first

cues for Cannon's M.S. identity. Because a human and resident of the USA would not be able to recognize these instruments by himself.

"It will be very brief, Mr. Cannon, because so far I've been forced to give your reception committee a lot of rambling explanations that lead nowhere. I have connections to the New Power. As you probably know, for weeks and months Perry Rhodan has been bringing together interesting people with whom he is building a sound foundation for the citizens of his country. In this connection, I have been able several times to arrange rather favorable meetings. For a lot of money, of course. For this reason I am coming to you today. The incident with Capt. Brown was certainly not on my agenda and I was informed of the intentions of the police only this morning. Unfortunately, that is why my appearance became a little dramatic."

"Despite this, you will find that I am quite surprised," said Cannon. "Anyway, I cannot imagine why the police might have a complaint against me. I find such behavior of the law rather unusual."

"Nowadays they have something against the most upright citizens, Mr. Cannon. I don't need to tell you how the invasion by the M.S. has affected human minds. That is why it is no wonder when some officials of intermediate rank give orders to shoot this one or that. If you throw suspicion on the M.S. you can excuse any murder these days."

"M.S. suspicion sounds interesting," observed Cannon, as if totally unconcerned. But now his thoughts developed an activity of panic proportions:

"Discovered?—Have I been discovered? What is Linker thinking? Is he part of this game too? But that would be too complicated! Linker cannot know anything. He would have let them kill me, if he was sympathizing with the police . . ."

". . . How is it that I, especially, have been suspected?"

"You shouldn't say 'especially'. Nowadays everybody is suspect if you so much as dream a bad dream about him. Nothing makes any sense. We have only one consolation, that our technical development soon will help us to overcome this. We are developing instruments with which to recognize M.S. transformed persons."

Again panic welled up large in the thoughts of Clive Cannon. Far worse than what could be expected in a human being in a like situation. Now Marshall was completely sure that Cannon had been infected and that the M.S. had an entirely unheroic personality.

"You don't say!" laughed Cannon somewhat dubiously, as if he was sorry that these instruments were not yet available. "By the time your technology has been developed, the M.S. will have conquered the whole Earth, believe me!"

"You should not be so pessimistic," countered Marshall. "Of course something like that cannot be produced at will, like magic, but with Arkonide methods which are available in the Gobi, we can count on success within a few weeks. The New Power is calling on all its available resources to solve the problem and one of these days it will."

"One of these days . . . ? You mean, perhaps, by tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow. But I will bet it will not take more than two, three months. Until then the people have to hold on. But meanwhile both of us, you and I, can expect some crazy fool to run amuck and shoot us. Nobody is safe any more."

"Nobody," repeated Cannon reflectively. His M.S. excitement had noticeably subsided. He was already eyeing new plans in which the technology of the New

Power would play an important role. Thoughtwise, Marshall received approximately the following: *"In two months they will be able to recognize us. In two months, then, the New Power must have been conquered."*

"No one. Nevertheless, I must thank you, Mr. Linker. You have saved my life," Cannon concluded.

"I did it in my own interests," said Marshall. "After all, I was hoping to transact some business with you."

"That sounds a little friendlier. What does this concern?"

"You know Homer G. Adams and the GCC?"

"By now it has made the rounds that the New Power is behind it. But why do you talk about my strongest competitor?"

"Because competition is good. Let's play with open cards, Mr. Cannon! Naturally Adams is one of our best men. Actually he is almost too good. Do you understand?"

"Not quite."

"The New Power is first a political instrument. The economic facility which stands behind us in the form of the GCC is a necessary evil. But it becomes dangerous when it threatens to become autonomous. We would like to place our industry under separate leadership, and let our financial genius remain a mirror image. Would you trust yourself, Mr. Cannon, to give Mr. Homer G. Adams a little competition in our name?"

"Hm, that is an overwhelming offer—and a question that one cannot answer extemporaneously."

It was indeed a difficult question. Nonetheless, the two men came to an agreement in the course of the morning. And Marshall had reason to be proud of his diplomatic chess move. Instead of having to beg Cannon to follow him to the Gobi, Cannon was begging *him!* With the frenzy of an M.S.-transformed victim,

he sought any means to conquer the restricted zone of the New Power in order to prevent the further development of a successful M.S. detction device.

"I don't know," Marshall demurred uncertainly. "To bring you along is way beyond my jurisdiction. Rhodan had figured it this way: that you should continue to maintain your office and the whole organization of the Kreysky syndicate, and then add to it."

"I was not planning it any different. We shall continue the way we are here in Chicago and show Adams that he is not alone in the world. But you will understand that I must familiarize myself with everything. I need an idea of the size of the gigantic things you hear about from the Gobi Desert. I want to know who my superiors are. Certainly the position which they have in mind for me should be high enough to justify a personal discussion with Perry Rhodan."

"I recognize your position, Mr. Cannon. Give me a day so that I can get in touch with my people. Tomorrow morning at the same time I will call again and bring you Rhodan's decision. If it is favorable, I would suggest we leave immediately."

"I'll be ready whenever you say, Mr. Linker."

* * * *

In the hotel, Bell and Marshall briefed each other by radio. A climbing sortie across the balconies in the mddle of the day was not advisable.

Bell was honest enough to admit his complete failure. Marshall's success at least helped to console him somewhat.

"You know that Cannon suspects nothing?"

"Nothing in regard to my plan to lure him into the Gobi. Unless he tries a certain caper that could cost us our heads."

"Now all you have to tell me is that this thing has a clincher."

"A very big one at that. You have to go on to New York today, Mr. Bell. Cannon is planning an attack on Adams."

"Did he say that too?"

"He was thinking it. And very clearly at that. A transformee named Porter is going to contact Adams and invite him to a rendezvous on Staten Island. There, an original M.S. is going to await him to transform him. It is my opinion you should be there when that happens."

"I sure should. I'll leave in an hour. When is this mysterious Porter going to leave?"

"This afternoon. That means you have a little time. Before dark, the M.S. are not apt to do anything."

"OK! If everything goes well, I'll be bringing Rhodan a real M.S. within 24 hours. He will be very important to him."

"More than you think," countered Marshall. "Cannon wants to take his real body along. He was imagining large amounts of luggage. I'd like to know how he is going to declare *that!*"

"Hm, and why is he taking his original body? That could only give him away. Besides, he doesn't need it in the immediate vicinity, if he fears complications. The return to it is supposed to be possible over fairly great distances, according to Khrest's statements."

"But not the renewed transfer into another person."

"Why is that?"

"Well, the fellow has a very simple plan: as soon as he is in the dome he wants to leave Cannon and transfer to Rhodan."

Bell was dumbfounded for a moment. "Marshall,

you're playing with fire. At all costs you must notify Rhodan in advance!''

''That was my intention. And now, have a good trip! Give my regards to Adams!''

5/ ATTACK FRONT: NEW YORK

As indicated by Marshall's information, Clive Cannon's luggage was indeed of ominous proportions.

"What? You want to take all that, Mr. Cannon?"

The boss of the Bluebird gang was smiling.

"I can see you are thinking of 24 dozen dress shirts, right?"

"Something more like an alligator. But I'm sure you know we don't have a zoo in the Gobi as yet. If it's your intention to bring Mr. Rhodan a gift, you will have to think of something else."

"A gift it is, you are quite right. But exchange it I will not. I should think Mr. Rhodan would still have a touch of sentiment left."

"Now I'm really getting curious! A coffin undoubtedly can make a person sentimental. But a corpse inside it would border on the bizarre. Go ahead and open it, Mr. Cannon! I'm curious as to what sort of ideas you came up with."

Cannon opened the lid. Inside the trunk was a lifesized replica of the *Stardust*, the spaceship which Rhodan had used to go to the Moon.

"Marvels of the technological age I can hardly offer your boss. He would have more success with the Arkonides. But this here, this memorial is worthy of a human being. Of course it is sentimental. Be honest, Mr. Linker! Is Rhodan going to like it or is he going to think me a screwball? I would not like to make a bad impression on him, you understand?"

John Marshall was temporarily dazed. He blinked his eyes and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. He forced a smile. "You may be assured, Mr. Cannon.

Perry Rhodan is not far behind you when it comes to being sentimental. Have them take your luggage to the airport. We'll find a fitting place for the *Stardust* in the Gobi."

They drove off to the airport.

It seemed just like a harmless weekend excursion. There were no heavily-armed escorts. On one of the outlying runways, a small private plane of the kind that was available to members of the New Power in any larger city of a certain size awaited them. The large trunk had already been placed aboard.

John Marshall himself did the flying. At an altitude of 20,000 meters he switched the controls over to automatic pilot and leaned back into his seat. For awhile the man talked about utterly trifling subjects. It was the same type of conversation that others would carry on about the weather and bad times. Meaningless, because neither of them could talk openly about that which was really meaningful to them and moving. Only Marshall had the advantage of being able to search in the other's mind. He faked a yawn and insisted that he had not slept well.

"We have two hours now and could take a little nap."

Clive Cannon followed his suggestion and remained silent. And this silence was what caused the murderous thoughts to come to full bloom.

Marshall shuddered.

Was he flying with a human being? Or with a monster?

Long before the take-off, he had known what the "coffin" with the replica of the *Stardust* signified. There were two coffins. The one on board did not contain a harmless rocket model, it contained the other half of Clive Cannon, the one he needed to be a real person. And it contained the body of the Mind

Snatcher, which represented the prison for Cannon's human mind.

And even this imprisoned mind still had an emanation, even though it had been sentenced to a death-like existence inside of that "shell". He could not defend himself or get anyone's attention. But he lived and felt the prison of that monster's body. He let the telepath know that he was going thru hell, the likes of which no human being could ever imagine.

John Marshall longed for the landing. He felt the limits of his mental endurance. Two or three hours more in these tight quarters together with the threatened and tortured thoughts of the two exchange psyches would surely drive him to the edge of insanity.

Then they flew over the Gobi. Over the realm of the New Power.

The usual dialog took place. The positronic checkoff for split-second entry into the energy dome. And then the rocket ship landed from a vertical approach.

In the meantime Perry Rhodan issued his final instructions. He had asked only a few people to assist him with the welcome of the plane from Chicago. They were Dr. Manoli, Dr. Haggard and the teleporter Ras Tschubai.

"I alone will do the talking," explained Rhodan once more. "Do not enter into the conversation until I give you the signal. And do not, under any circumstances, challenge Cannon to show us his strange gift. You see, at that moment he is forced to take action. And I want to be the one to pick that moment myself. I only want you to be alert, ready to shoot, and to control yourselves. Take care not to let Cannon know immediately that you see the monster in him."

The welcome was fit for a State Department visitor, only the journalists and honor guards were absent. While Rhodan accompanied Clive Cannon to his of-

fice, two robot attendants waited until the two men had disappeared inside the building. They then proceeded to the loading ramp of the plane and took the long, heavy trunk out with the trained care one usually expects in that type of work. They set it down in an adjoining shed and then stationed themselves at their posts nearby, as instructed.

The men, meanwhile, had arrived at Rhodan's office.

"As far as I know, Mr. Cannon, our friend Linker has already discussed the basic ideas with you."

"It was necessary in order to convince Mr. Cannon to take over the planned position", said John Marshall.

"Quite right", continued the transformed man. "Generally speaking, I have been informed and am willing to accept the position you have offered me. Also, I want very much to thank you for allowing me the opportunity of visiting the almost mythical Control Central of the New Power."

"Your wish was, of course, reasonable, Mr. Cannon, and you see I agreed to it right away. However, you will of course understand that the New Power must observe certain precautions in the present situation."

"How do you mean that?"

"Well, every visitor must be examined to see whether he has been invaded by the M.S."

"Yes, yes, of course. Mr. Linker told me about it already. He said that probably in a few weeks you will have discovered a method by which you can recognize an M.S. infiltration at first glance."

"That is correct. The research work is in high gear and the basic technical concept is also known. In three months at the very most we will distribute these instruments to all points on Earth. We here in the Gobi Desert also have other methods thru which even today we are in a position to detect an M.S."

With this sentence the duel began.

Clive Cannon and the stranger in him had been at top alert. Now the signal had been given and several reactions were taking place in this split second simultaneously.

The natural fear of death of the M.S. was trying to hide itself behind the sensibility of the human being. But the shock was too powerful. Clive Cannon couldn't help getting up stiffly from his chair and casting a tortured glance sideways.

He observed the muzzles of five pistols all pointed at him from all directions at once.

Resignedly he fell back and suddenly looked relieved once more. "Boy, Mr. Rhodan, you really had me scared for a moment. Will you show me your present method?"

"Not show but use it. Naturally we have to check you too. You see, if you are normal, absolutely nothing will happen. Should there be an M.S. inside you, though, we will catch him in just a few minutes."

"With these pistols?" Cannon laughed out loud.

"You are quite right", nodded Rhodan. Before we shoot, you see, the M.S. inside of you would have to leave the human body and return to his own. The exchanged human mind of the real Mr. Cannon would then tell us everything."

"Sure. But the M.S. would then have escaped you anyway."

"Not necessarily, Mr. Cannon. Let's stay with your own example. Let's assume your M.S. body has been deposited somewhere nearby. We then have to count on the M.S. starting a renewed attack on someone else immediately. He would select the most important one that would be available—me, for example!"

"Naturally, that is very interesting from a purely theoretical point of view."

"Now think along with me! How could the New Power protect itself against such a new attack?"

"Hm, I don't know. To be honest with you, I have never really given this sort of thing any thought before. I do, of course, listen to the daily news and read the papers . . . "

"Then I will tell you. We would have to find the original body of the M.S. We would have to guard it and kill it at the proper opportunity. The attack on me would then be nipped in the bud and humanity freed from another invader."

Marshall encountered great difficulty with his telepathic observations because too many people were too close to him. But Cannon's brain activity had again risen toward the end of the discussion to such an extent that his emission was clearly in the foreground.

"Obviously," said Cannon seemingly bored and without conviction, "you would have to find the M.S. body and then kill him."

Everybody could see that Cannon was trembling. Everybody expected the ego to switch. But it appeared the monster was also interested in information. He had been shocked by Rhodan's revelations and captivated at the same time. He still hesitated.

"There would be a third possibility", explained Rhodan wistfully. If the M.S. would give up any further attempts for action and give himself up. That would save his life."

Clive Cannon laughed shrilly and without constraint. "But then you would have to have the body. Where will you find the body?"

The master of the New Power pointed to a row of buttons on his desk. "Look here! When I press here, an impulse activates two robots. These robots can shoot. At this moment they are standing right next to your big trunk which contains your so-called gift to the host."

For the M.S., the dilemma in which he found himself was finished.

He jumped up, emitted an inhuman yell and threw himself on Perry Rhodan.

* * * *

From Chicago to New York it was only a stone's throw.

Reginald Bell landed around 16:00 hours, took care of formalities at the airport administration office and requested a porter to send his voluminous luggage to the Cumberland Hotel, where he registered via videophone.

Afterwards he went over to the GCC Building without stopping anywhere else and was quietly looking forward to seeing Homer G. Adams again, the Minister of Finance of the New Power, the little man with the big, intelligent head.

In the reception room, Ms. Lawrence welcomed him. They were happy to see each other.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Bell! It's nice of you to come around once in awhile. I'll fix you a cup of coffee right away. OK?"

"Oh, fine! But would you please serve me the java in my boss' office. I've a few things to discuss with him."

"Ah, yes, the boss! Mr. Adams already has completed three business trips with an average distance of 500 kilometers today. You will have to wait for him a moment. I tell him every day that he is overdoing it and that he isn't as young as he used to be."

"Do you think that type of compliment is very diplomatic?"

"I am not sure if any kind of diplomacy can help him. Mr. Adams does exactly what he considers right. He cannot be influenced."

"Not even by a pretty young woman?"

"Mr. Bell! What do you mean by such a remark?"

They both laughed and agreed that Bell should have his coffee in the reception room with Ms. Lawrence. She offered him some cookies and prodded him to talk.

"In a minute. But first I want you to tell me where Adams went and when he will return."

"Well, you know, twice today a man was here to demonstrate a new gadget that is ready to be patented. I don't know anything about the technical details. But anyway, theoretically it appears to be a very promising thing, which cannot be said about most of the inventions that are brought in here daily. A quarter of an hour ago the boss returned from Albany. Since the man had already been waiting for several hours, they left together soon after. That is to say, they were going over to Staten Island."

Bell shot up out of his chair. "To Staten Island? Are you quite sure about that?"

"Of course! Is that so exciting?"

"What was that man's name?"

"Wait a minute. His name was Porter."

"Porter! Porter! Damn! Don't you know that Porter is one of the M.S. transformees? Come on, let's go! We mustn't lose a second!"

Bell pulled the receptionist into the next elevator car and they went up to the roof. There he took the first company-owned helicopter they came to and unceremoniously pushed Ms. Lawrence into it. Only when he had the chopper on a southerly course did he say anything.

"Staten Island is pretty big. Did Adams say where?"

"He mentioned the Relling Docks. That's all I know," the girl blurted out. Other questions were on the tip of her tongue but she was too excited to be able to talk cohesively. The thought that her boss was about to fall into the hands of the M.S. had a shock effect on her.

Bell told her in a few short sentences what he had run into in Chicago.

"We miscalculated. We thought Porter would, like us, start from there. But now I know that he was living in New York and would be able to come and see you in your office immediately after hearing from Cannon. And to think that I took my time in Chicago having lunch!"

They crossed the Upper Bay.

"Do you know your way around here?" inquired Bell.

"You have to keep more over to the right toward Newark Bay. There, see that building with the green roof? I think that's where it must be."

The helicopter gradually descended. They were able to recognize ships, boats, cars and people. As yet they were unable to see that the people were fleeing.

Only after they landed did they find out that they had gotten into a witch's cauldron. Hundreds of workers, among them a few women, were fleeing to the west, gripped by panic.

"What the devil is going on here?"

Bell had opened the plexiglass hatch. Suddenly a man was hanging onto the side.

"Go on! Take me with you! And take off now, if you value your life!"

"Just a minute! Don't you want to tell me first what is going on here?"

"What's going on here?" screamed the man half-crazed. "The M.S. have landed! There, behind the building they are, by the hundreds. Go on, man! Don't ask so many questions!"

The man pulled himself up to the door sill and threatened them with a heavy iron bar which he had raised above his head.

* * * *

Homer G. Adams really had not known. Inventors came to see him daily. Mostly they were crotchety people who, for the last 20 years, had taken 3 or 4 hours daily of their spare time to devote to the rediscovery of the perpetual motion principle. Porter had impressed him as more objective than the others. And besides, he had not mentioned the perpetual motion machine but spoke only of an electro-magnetic jet which was supposed to save a spacecraft traveling in outer space approximately 90% of the fuel normally carried on board, due to utilization of the energy sources naturally available.

Adams noticed the trap only after it was too late. Porter led him into the hall. "Behind these doors is my laboratory. I think you will be convinced in only a few minutes."

But behind the doors there was nothing that resembled a laboratory. The room was empty. The only decorations were five genuine Mind Snatchers, who slowly and stiffly marched toward him.

Adams had no time to let the optical impression of those monstrous spectres react on his analytical mind. The man-like bodies with 4 arms and 2 legs, the insect-like heads with the many-faceted peripherally placed eyes—all that lost its meaning when confronted with the immediate mental attack. Adams did not know which one of the five was attempting to enter his mind. He only felt the piercing pain which penetrated his brain like a scalpel and seemed to pry it loose.

He knew that he was falling to the floor. But he did not feel himself hitting the floor. And then an unfamiliar entity mixed in with the sensation of ripping.

It was the feeling of triumph.

"We have got him—you belong to us—we've got him—Homer G. Adams—we have the GCC—we've

got New York—I've got you and you will go where I want you to."

Adams was lying on his back and at the same time was standing beside his body bending down over himself. In this paradox it was not important that that could not be. Neither was it important that the body on the floor represented the human entity and the one standing bent over represented the Mind Snatcher. Important was that he saw himself twice.

The impressions were superimposed on top of each other and interacted with each other like a double exposure. The man's eye was reflected in the thousand-faceted insect eyes. Adams even forgot the agony over his inability to define the ego. He saw himself craving to conquer. He also saw himself full of fear bordering on panic which made him want to turn away and plunge himself into the void.

The hour of open attack on New York by the Mind Snatchers had come!

They all knew the moment. The M.S. and the transformed humans.

Porter saw the commotion outside. He jumped onto the pier and scattered the crowds into chaotic flight with his make-believe agitation. The M.S. followed them. Four of them from this room. They were not attacking anyone's mind as yet. So far they had merely wanted to impress thru their monstrous appearance. In that, they succeeded completely.

During this time no more spectators were watching the duel between Adams and the M.S. They were alone and each battled with his own natural defenses. Just for three minutes, however, because the man was stronger physically—even if he had long ago passed the youthful stage in life and had a big head and was small of stature.

At some point Adams' hands had dug deep into the

flesh of his adversary. Chitin crumbled under his fingers and a dark red fluid ran onto the dirty tile floor. The pain was gone. The monster was dead.

Completely exhausted, Adams got up. Unconsciously and purely by instinct, he brushed the dust off his clothes. His mind was concentrating on the danger of New York. He knew how much the M.S. knew, and acted accordingly.

The Relling Docks were swept clean. The harbor lay lifeless in the fog. A few sirens wailed in the distance. Thousands of the most strategic positions in this world metropolis, meanwhile, had been taken over by M.S. From mayor to police chief, from industrial tycoon to the Chiefs of TV networks.

Extras were being printed proclaiming the death penalty for anyone leaving the city or any unauthorized news broadcasts. The noose was drawing tighter around the metropolis. How long before it was completely closed?

Adams realized he could not waste another minute.

A return to Manhattan inevitably meant a waste of time.

He turned south and decided to use one of the cars parked directly next to the building. Somewhere he would pick up an airplane . . .

* * * *

"Mr. Bell!" screamed Jeanette Lawrence and pointed in front of them.

"You fool!" roared the man with the iron pipe. "Don't you see what is going on here?"

Reginald Bell did see. And he also knew that at this very moment the search for Homer G. Adams had become completely useless. On the pier appeared several Mind Snatchers. Not hundreds but only four of them. But these four were enough.

"Come on. Get inside!"

They squeezed into the two-man compartment and Bell started the engines. When they had landed on the roof of the GCC Building, pandemonium had already broken loose in the streets. The militia as well as the police were patrolling the asphalt jungle of Manhattan. Whether human being or M.S.-transformed person, it was suddenly immaterial. The M.S. were in command . . .

"I can't understand it!" cried Jeanette Lawrence. "After all, 8 million invaders couldn't suddenly come into town."

"Obviously a few hundred are enough. If they occupy the key position in the political and economic structure of the city government, the masses are powerless."

"Eight million people against a few hundred?" Her question ended in a shrill, hysterical laughter. Bell helped her into an armchair.

"There now, sit down here and take a deep breath . . . Now exhale . . . Now do that again a couple more times. I'll try to explain to you why we are powerless. You see, the M.S. all know one another. But no man can say of another with certainty whether he is loyal or not. There is no unity even among the healthy ones."

"But the two of us! We both know for instance that we have not been infected. Why don't you send a radio message to Rhodan?"

"Because I can't. You heard the mayor's announcement on the way over."

"And you intend to follow that? Because they are threatening the death penalty? My God, Bell, I would have thought you had more guts than that!"

"Try to pit courage against technological advancement! No, Ms. Lawrence, don't try to act superior now!

I did try to reach him. Obviously you didn't notice it. It doesn't work."

She stared at him in disbelief. His resignation did not make any sense.

"You are an M.S., aren't you? You have been transformed, Bell! Of course, what else could it be?"

"Don't talk nonsense! Come along with me!"

He led her to the microphone in Adams' study. With a few swift hand motions, he had cleared the instrument and was calling Perry Rhodan. They waited. Seconds, minutes. No answer.

"Now do you understand?" groaned Bell. "The warning is only a formality. The M.S. have had enough time to study our mentality and can now anticipate our reactions. They placed New York under an energy shield."

"Like in the Gobi Desert?"

"In principle, yes. Though it is possible that it is constructed differently. If we can believe Khrest, there is no intelligent life out there that can construct energy shields like the Arkonides. From our attempt to use the radio we only can deduce that the radio waves hit an obstruction, so that at the moment the only thing that has been proven is that the energy shield absorbs the so-called radio frequencies within the electromagnetic spectrum. Whether the shield can stop pure matter would have to be seen.

"Then why don't we try it!"

"How do you imagine it should be done?"

"With the helicopter, for instance."

"So that they can shoot us down, right? Or actually fly against an invisible wall and crash."

Jeanette Lawrence looked at him hopelessly. "So it's all over for us."

Bell shook his head. "Not if you muster the same amount of courage as you expected of me just now."

"What shall I do?"

"Nothing but be brave and stick it out. Here in New York."

"You are flying alone? Mr. Bell! Listen to me! Adams once told me something about Arkonide hyperwaves. They supposedly operate in five dimensions."

"Yes, I know. But they have such transmitters only on the *Good Hope,* in the Gobi station and on Venus. Listen carefully, Ms Lawrence! I have already considered every possibility. I'm going to fly alone and take the news of the fall of New York out with me. I am the only person now who has the technological capabilities to do it."

"What do you have?"

"I have an Arkonide spacesuit. Surely you have heard of it?"

She looked at him wide-eyed. "Yes, Mr. Bell. I have heard of it. There are supposed to be only two of them. Perry Rhodan has one . . . "

" . . . and I have the other. Here in New York. It commands an energy field thru which I can alter the visible frequencies and the radio frequencies. I shall be invisible when I leave New York."

6/ HIDDEN SHADOW MONSTER

"Don't shoot!" shouted Rhodan. At the same moment he jumped out of the way so that Cannon's lunge ended in a resounding thud against the desk. When he jerked around he again saw the pistols facing him and he hesitated. He also hesitated to jump into the body of the M.S. Escape now seemed impossible.

Marshall, who had picked up his thoughts, said: "You have a third choice of which Mr. Rhodan spoke just now. Give yourself up! Prisoners are not being executed as long as they cooperate with the power making the arrest."

Cannon looked inquiringly at Rhodan. "What are your plans?"

"We shall make a deal with you. If the discussions turn out positive for all of us, I'll be willing to return you as spokesman to your own people. Of course, not as a human being."

"Why don't you then let me return to my body right now?"

"Because you are safer for us this way. Well, what's your decision?"

"You are going to give me conditions, aren't you?"

"I can't tell you that now. The decisions are much too important for me to reach them alone. We shall conduct our discussions in the presence of the positronic Brain."

Again something within him recoiled. "You are planning treachery, Rhodan!"

"Do not project, Cannon! I believe you are familiar with the workings of a robot brain? If I was planning to kill you I would not have to go to so much trouble."

Clive Cannon nodded slowly. "Good, I suppose. Nevertheless I would like it if we could hurry up a little."

"In this point we are already agreed. Eric and Ras, take him over to the hall and stay with him until I get there."

Manoli and Ras Tschubai led Cannon away.

When Rhodan was alone with Dr. Haggard and Marshall, he asked them: "What was he thinking about? Is he planning to betray us? Does he know anything of my plans?"

"What are your plans, sir?"

Even as a telepath, Marshall could not get thru Rhodan's thought barrier.

"I am seriously contemplating a negotiation with the M.S., if that is at all possible. Naturally, I understand that the invaders would not curtail their aggression because of the fate of this isolated being. More important is the research of the M.S.-possessed brain. We'll measure and check Cannon without him realizing it. He really doesn't know anything, does he?"

"No, in that regard he does not even suspect anything."

"That's good. Come on!"

The men were about to leave the office when the radio receiver set turned on automatically.

"Adams to Rhodan—Adams to Rhodan! Please come in for immediate reply!"

Perry Rhodan quickly crossed over to the radio controls. "Rhodan here! What's wrong, Adams?"

"Thank God, sir! Listen! I am stuck here in Canada—exactly at 50° latitude North and 85° longitude West—at the railway line Quebec-Winnipeg."

"How in blazes did you get there? That spot's almost in the wilderness."

"Take note of this too, Mr. Rhodan: I had to flee

New York. The city is occupied by the M.S. and almost totally in their hands. Since yesterday afternoon, all news has been censored by the M.S. You must take immediate counteraction and, if possible, have me picked up from here. I had to steal an old prop plane and now I have run out of gasoline."

Perry Rhodan listened to the alarming news but a robot could not have reacted with less emotion.

"Can you be more specific about the situation in New York?"

"No sir! M.S. were trying to invade me. That's when I had to get out of there. I left town right away from Staten Island and went south."

"M.S. were trying to invade you?" Suddenly there was a trace of suspicion in the voice of Rhodan. "Now I am even more curious how you could escape their influence."

"You may rest assured, Mr. Rhodan! I am completely OK. Obviously you knew what you were doing when you took me into the Mutant Corps. My so-called photographic memory has talents which I fully recognized only yesterday. I was alone with the M.S. It was a fair fight. That fellow simply couldn't get the better of me. My inner self indeed seems to be dependent on the memory cells. It sticks to me and won't leave. When the M.S. attacked, there were moments when I felt as if I had already been taken over. Already I was looking out of multi-faceted eyes and I knew what those M.S. had in mind."

"Just a minute! You just said you didn't know the situation in New York."

"Of course! But I had to get out. There is a big difference between the plans of the invaders and the situation in the city."

"You should be a little less of a perfectionist, Adams. Now, what plans did the enemy have?"

Homer G. Adams told what he knew. That was enough for the men in the Gobi Desert, and even as Rhodan continued, he was making plans for a counterattack.

"Is there any danger the M.S. might have followed you?"

"I don't think so. If they had recognized me, I wouldn't even have been able to leave New York."

"Then wait! I'll send Ras Tschubai to you. Any further plans in regards to New York I will announce later. Keep your lines open. By the way, did you hear anything of Mr. Bell when you were in New York?"

"No, why? Was he coming?"

"Yes, he was," said Rhodan dejectedly. "And he *did*. Now we have another reason to look in on that city."

"Not necessary, Perry! I'm already over the Japanese Channel."—It was Reginald Bell's voice which had cut in on the line.

"My God, Bell! Are you alright?"

"Absolutely."

"Weren't you in New York?"

"Sure, that's where I'm coming from. The Arkonide spacesuit helped me get out."

"You're absolutely too much! You're coming down about when—in say, half an hour?"

"Exactly."

"Well—so much for that! I have an important job to do."

* * * *

An Arkonide positronic brain had different ways of delivering answers. It could make its findings known over a loudspeaker, magnetic tape, magnetophone or photographic tape as well as on punchcards of Earthly origin or, as a close equivalent, thru impulse-writing on

plasticards. There was a similar range of methods for the input of questions, so that Perry Rhodan was able to work on two levels simultaneously.

With collaboration from Cannon he dictated the correct questions into the microphone. The most important work process concerning the detection of an M.S. brain in a human body, he fed into the keyboard with written symbols.

In this manner he received two answers within 20 minutes. One of these Rhodan showed to his prisoner.

"The Brain cannot be bribed, as you can see. At the moment, there is little sense in having you be a spokesman for us. Your good intentions and your fear alone are not enough. I think we will be patient for a few days longer and see if the situation on the front might not change to such an extent that your side might eventually be ready to negotiate."

Cannon gave in to his fate. If he could see one thing clearly, it was his own loss of power. Two robot guards led him away.

For his friends, Rhodan had a more optimistic view. "Read this, gentlemen!"

It was the magnetic tape with the results of the M.S. examination.

"That's the solution," remarked Dr. Haggard after a moment of silence. "Congratulations, Mr. Rhodan!"

"It's not the final solution for a totally integrated telepathic device but at the moment we'll be satisfied with being able to isolate an M.S. brain when we're looking for one. And that we have accomplished! See here, in these three formulas we have everything we need. Our basic principle is in the Arkonide brainwave detector. Before the day is out we'll program five robots with the data received and I'm convinced that within 24 hours we'll have our first finished model."

"Our robots are going to build one?"

"Yes, ours!" grinned Rhodan. "Naturally I'm referring to those that we brought back from Venus. They can do it. And if you don't believe it, Doc, I will gladly take your bet."

"No thanks, sir! Your optimism is enough for me."

"Very well, then we can continue our examination of the M.S. body which at this time houses the personality of the real Clive Cannon. First something else, though. We haven't heard anything from Mercant for a long time, have we?"

"He still has three more days."

"Hm. Anyway, I think enough has transpired in the meantime that he should think about reporting in."

Rhodan called the Greenland base of the IIA. They called Mercant to the line. "Hello, Mr. Rhodan! Anything new?"

"Hello, Mercant. A few things have happened. But first to you. You were going to see Adams on your way back?"

"Quite right. That is tomorrow."

"Forget that. New York is in the hands of the M.S."

"Are you joking?"

"Absolutely not. Adams and Bell are the only ones who were able to get out of the city yesterday."

Mercant replied with a snort. "Come on, now! Only half an hour ago I talked with colleagues in New York."

"And every answer that you received has been censored by the M.S. Don't act dumber than you really are, Mercant! Return immediately to the safety zone! I urge you. And bring along anyone you can recruit for our cause in the meantime."

"There are exactly 304."

"That's enough. Arrange it so that you can land here in 24 hours at the most."

"As you say, sir. Goodby!"

"Goodby!"

* * * *

Homer G. Adams had lain down in the pilot's seat of his disabled craft and tried to take a nap. Suddenly something startled him. He could not say what it was. All he knew was that it had been caused by something inside his brain.

He looked down at the ground, then climbed onto the wings in order to see better. From there to the horizon he saw nothing suspicious. Only pastures, endless brush, neither man nor beast. Two kilometers away were the railroad tracks. Nothing had changed since his landing. There was nothing for him to do but wait. To sleep and perhaps to dream.

Dream!

Had he been dreaming? Where did these doubts come from?

Never in his life had Adams had any difficulty with his memory. This ability had been with him since his childhood. He read a poem and immediately memorized it. He studied mathematical formulas and remembered them. He had gotten used to the gift and eventually had accepted his so-called genius as a fact.

And now suddenly this doubt?

Adams walked a few steps thru the brush and then returned. He tried to do a math problem in his head —one that was essentially like those he handled all the time in his stockmarket manipulations.

He had been an M.S. Yes! On Staten Island a part of

him had been taken over by an M.S. He had seen thru faceted eyes, known what the enemy knew. But he'd remained Homer Adams and had choked the monster to death. They'd neither overpowered him nor destroyed his photographic memory. As a human being he had remained the same . . .

And then he knew what it was! A part of the M.S. personality was still within him. Pushed far to the back. Unusual for him, who never could forget anything. It was just there, like a shadow. In his subconscious.

And the new question which could not be self-critical enough!

Why had he flown to Canada? To get away from the States, since that was where the M.S. were starting their big invasion?

That would be illogical because the M.S. didn't follow state lines created by human beings. What drew him to Canada? This brush country, where the 50th parallel just happened to intersect with the 85th degree of longitude? The subconscious?

Adams fought against this figment of the imagination because it contradicted his human genius. And yet he felt compelled to listen to an inner voice. There was something else within.

He closed his eyes and struggled for deepest concentration. For several minutes he sat there in the shadow of the airplane. Then he got up as if in a trance and walked toward the railroad tracks. Two kilometers. A quarter of an hour.

His doubts turned to conviction. Suddenly he knew. He knew what the dead M.S. had left behind inside his brain.

The culverts! At intervals of 100 meters, culverts had been dug thru the railroad embankment. And one of these hid the entrance to a man-made grotto.

Adams walked the distance with somnambulistic

certainty. The very first one was the right one. A hidden switch. A concrete wall moved aside and bared a stepless path which gently sloped downward.

More than 200 lifeless-looking bodies. No guards. Only the imprisoned egos of the invaded humans lay trapped in soulful agony within the monstrous beings.

Adams backed away. Just before he reached the airplane, Ras Tschubai's plane showed up to take him back.

7/ COUNTERATTACK!

So many important people showed up that it looked like a class reunion.

Allan D. Mercant had returned from Greenland. He had brought with him 304 volunteers for the police troop of the New Power and, as Rhodan had suggested, abandoned his plan to stop off in New York. Homer G. Adams, whom he had wanted to see there, had already arrived in the Gobi Desert and the two now had an opportunity to welcome each other under protection of the energy shield.

All conversation ceased when Perry Rhodan entered from his office. The groups broke up and stepped aside in order to let him by. The chief of the New Power had something to tell them.

"Ladies & Gentlemen! I want to make this short. I have read your reports and it is my conclusion that we do not have much time to turn the tide in our favor, in favor of Earth. Our surveillance of the most important personages of our planet could not be completed as planned, simply because we did not have the necessary number of telepaths available. Our enemy has succeeded with his first massive attack in at least two spaceships dropping an unknown number of Mind Snatchers on Earth. After the destruction of his base in Tibet, he reportedly was able to set up others. He even was successful in getting control of one of the largest cities in the world, although the public is led to believe that everything is status quo. You may realize from this how dangerous the enemy is."

Rhodan reached into his pocket and pulled out a device that, in principle, most of them were familiar with. Only the shape had been changed slightly.

"You all know the brainwave pattern detector. Our dream of converting this into a sort of telepathic instrument has been accomplished today with some limitations. Thru an exact analysis of a brain that had been invaded by an M.S., the positronic Brain was able to give us new completion data in a very shortime. Here you have the improved frequency detector, Ladies & Gentlemen. It enables us to recognize M.S.-transformed people at first glance thru a simple reading of the scale. I have already tested it on our prisoner Mr. Cannon. Within the next few minutes you will have a chance to observe this instrument in action and to convince yourselves of its effectiveness. Mr. Mercant, are your 304 candidates for our police troop ready at Post 42?"

"Yes sir."

"We'll all take the new local train and go to the northeast exit of the restricted zone. Lt. Klein, I want you to take control of the energy shield. We'll keep in touch over VHF. You, Bell, stay here and watch the radio."

Bell nodded only slightly.

"Let's go!" said Rhodan.

At Post 42 the 304 recruits had lined up and were waiting to be let inside the restricted zone. When Rhodan gave his radio signal to Klein, the whole protective cover of the energy shield collapsed. However, for the protection of the central area all three space interceptors had been ordered into intensified patrol duty. They had orders to shoot without special instructions at anyone without permission attempting to enter the central area of the New Power. In addition, more than 100 robot guards were patrolling the border which then was suddenly unprotected.

Rhodan had already briefed Mercant on the way over.

"I want your men to march single file thru Post 42. Have them march past me at no more than 5 meters distance. Should one of them already be invaded by the M.S. I will give you a signal. You will arrest him immediately."

Mercant entered the outer area alone and gave his people the necessary instructions. Without exception they were intelligent and disciplined men, and within two minutes the police corps aspirants marched in.

They gave a military salute almost as if in a dress parade. Rhodan acknowledged regularly and even found time for a reply to each questioning glance.

Their bright, open faces revealed the high quality of these men. Automatically John Marshall counted along. He stood one pace away from Perry Rhodan.

"257 - 258 - 259 - 260 - 261 . . . !"

Marshall swallowed hard, almost simultaneous with the detector's signal.

"The tall blond there," said Rhodan to Mercant. "Arrest him!"

"Right, Lt. Pirelli! Will you step over here, please!"

As the Nordic-looking man with the Italian name gave a slight start, Marshall whispered in the background: "Definitely, sir. He is one of them."

Pirelli hesitated.

"The devil, Lieutenant!" roared Mercant, suddenly very agitated. "Shall I send you a written invitation? You're holding up the works! Go on, march, gentlemen! 263 . . . !"

Pirelli obeyed and the men marched on.

"Wait a minute, Lieutenant! Your face seems familiar. I would like to talk to you," said Rhodan and then turned his attention to the others again. He knew that enough artillery was directed at Pirelli to check any untoward movement immediately.

John Marshall continued to count to 304. Neither he

nor the detector found another M.S. captive. That was a good average.

"Hello, Klein!" Rhodan called into the microphone. "Close the screen! The inspection is finished." And to Pirelli: "One question, Lieutenant. I want you to think your answer over carefully. Would you be willing to be the intermediary between me and the M.S.?"

Pirelli's face twitched imperceptibly. But those persons present knew that inside his body and mind a far more dramatic action was taking place.

"I don't understand, sir!"

"You have been identified as an M.S., Lieutenant. That is why I asked. So what do you say?"

"How could you identify me as an M.S., Mr. Rhodan? Where do you expect to get with this bluff?"

"You don't ask the questions here, Lieutenant, I do! You have been recognized as an M.S. Your answer will determine whether I will use you in my plans or whether you will be shot immediately."

Pirelli took an unplanned move forward but stopped before anyone could consider his attitude conclusively threatening.

"His fear is keeping him back," explained Marshall. "He is completely in our hands, sir. Because his M.S. body is not within transfer range. Just where it is, this gentleman is not about to say. He senses that I am a telepath. He is trying to scramble his thoughts."

"Alright, Marshall! So you see, Pirelli, how much we know. If we shoot you now, that'll be the end for you. Finished. Now, what is your answer to my first question?"

Pirelli straightened himself up to his maximum height and attempted to show pride in his posture. How might the cowardly ego of an M.S. feel in such a body?

"I am in your hands, Mr. Rhodan. If you order me to

be your spokesman, I shall obey. However, in my subordinate rank I am not in a position to say anything about the prospects of such negotiations."

"That is not necessary, Lieutenant. You will be isolated until tomorrow. You will have two robot guards by your bed who will kill you instantly at any sign of an attempt to escape or use of force. Tomorrow you will receive my further instructions. Thank you."

* * * *

Now there were 303 handpicked, excellent men left. For Rhodan this was the right occasion for a fullscale welcoming speech, considering that here was the young nucleus of the New Power. But again he made it short and unconventional.

" . . . maybe soon I will have more time to devote to you, gentlemen. Today, any second wasted is irretrievably lost. Eat hearty when you sit down to dinner which is waiting for you. My personal representatives, Mr. Mercant and Mr. Bell, will be giving you the necessary instructions."

In the office, Rhodan held a conference with his closest associates.

"You're pretty reckless," declared Bell at his first opportunity, when Rhodan had still not mentioned any of the real points of importance.

"Are you trying to teach me a lesson again?"

"We're not talking about my academic ambitions but about your personal security. While the men marched in, you didn't wear any kind of protection. You were trying to talk Pirelli out of using any kind of force. Do you think that with only your hypnotic stare you're going to be protected against these people?"

"Of course I do. You were being taken in by Pirelli's attitude. Apparently you don't realize yet what a cowardly nature actually hides behind these creatures. An

M.S. will never commit a crime as long as his own life is in danger.—And now enough of this exchange of opinions! The latest world news is coming in and after that we will probably realize once more that, even with noble intentions, it will always be difficult to let the people know we are sincere. The still-lingering complaints are our best evidence. I'll make one last attempt to convince the world. Our witnesses will be the people in New York. Because if there is anyone who can convince the inhabitants of this planet of the gruesome reality of the M.S. it would be the population of this metropolis that has been ravished for three days."

"The first requisite for all this would be to liberate these 8 million people."

"That is my plan. The robot factory already is manufacturing the first series of the new M.S. detectors. I have ordered 400 of them for a start."

"When will they be available?"

"Tomorrow morning. All available mutants, except the telepaths, will be equipped with them as well as the new police cadets and my closest associates. You, Bell, will fly to Luna tomorrow morning with 200 men and will first make contact with the robot command post stationed in the Anaxagoras crater. Evaluate the results. In case they have not established the location of the M.S. lunar base it will become your duty to take over. As soon as you have your goal in sight I will expect your report."

"Only a report?"

"Initially. The attack, which you ostensibly yearn for, will hardly be long in coming. Important is to attack simultaneously. That is why I want you to wait for my orders!"

"Very well!"

"As for you, Mr. Adams, don't tell me that you have no talent for heroism. I will give you several good men

on whom you can depend. I have in mind Ras Tschubai and 20 new policemen. Your destination is the Canadian base of the M.S. You too will hold your attack until I give the orders."

"As you say, sir," replied Adams in his humble manner, which he always demonstrated whenever it didn't have anything to do with money.

The last and most explicit admonition was directed to Allan D. Mercant, official chief of the International Intelligence Agency, which was under American leadership and unofficial member of the secret corps of mutants of the New Power, under Perry Rhodan. Mercant received an armada of six battle-ready, multipurpose rockets with an ample supply of weapons, adequate loading capacity and sufficient speed. His job was to free New York.

* * * *

As a new day dawned over the Gobi Desert, darkness was settling over New York.

The engines had been started.

First came Mercant's group which was followed by a single jet plane heading for Canada. The *Good Hope* waited until last. Despite her more distant goal she had to give precedence to the stratosphere air traffic but her acceleration capabilities in space enabled her to make up for any delays, even across planetary distances.

Rhodan was alone in the headquarters building. He had refused any help and had sent every able-bodied man to one of the three focal points of the expected hostilities.

His assistant was technology whose threads converged in the master controls in front of him.

As expected, the first message came in from Luna.

"Hello, Perry! Reporting AOK landing in the Anax-

agoras crater. Police troops disembarking. Next report after contact is made with robot commando."

"Thank you. Good luck. Over!"

"Roger. Over & out."

The hand of the clock moved on.

Next message. "We are circling over New York. Advancing into the city as anticipated without interference. Control measures obviously are only applied to anything leaving the city. We are landing on six different sites. Will proceed as discussed. Over!"

"As discussed." More precisely, this meant that within the next half-hour 50 of the most important personages would have armed company. They would be recognized instantly if M.S.-transformed and be treated accordingly with the necessary dispatch. Rhodan's orders had been distinct and unequivocal. In the fight against the M.S. there was no clemency.

"Hello, Mr. Rhodan!" It was the voice of Adams. "We are going to 50° latitude and 85° longitude. My old airplane hasn't been touched."

"OK, Adams! Take your positions along the railroad embankment and wait!"

Ten minutes radio silence. Then Reginald Bell's voice thundered across the airwaves. " . . . we headed south across the dark side of the Moon. Next landing in three minutes in the Mendeleyev crater. Robot commando clearly identified the position of the M.S. base. No sign of life. Over."

Then the reports tumbled in on top of each other. They came in on emergency wavelengths at the same time. Sound tracks recorded them for Rhodan. Thirty minutes later the situation came into focus.

Three lively M.S. guards had been killed on Luna. Bell reported the discovery of more than 500 stiff M.S. bodies whose erstwhile egos almost certainly were wandering about on Earth.

Rhodan interrupted the message. "No more details! Load every one of the bodies on the *Good Hope* immediately and bring them into the restricted zone. How long will it take you?"

"There are 200 of us. Each M.S. weighs on the average twice as much as a human. At moon gravity, that makes about 25 to 30 kilos. I need 15 minutes."

"Hurry up, Bell! I urgently need your 'catch'!"

Adams too received his instructions for further action. His job was much more difficult. With 20 men he had to load 200 M.S. bodies. Though Ras Tschubai soon relieved him of his greatest worry. The African had brought along a neutralizer by the use of which the nearly lifeless bodies were practically lifted off the ground. Now the job merely required dexterity instead of muscle.

Around 11:30, the *Good Hope* set down and shortly afterwards the "Adams" commando landed as well. The New Power was in possession of 732 M.S. bodies which were being stored in the jurisdictional area outside the energy barrier.

The *Good Hope* took off minutes later for New York and moored itself to the mast of the Empire State Building.

The *Good Hope* was bulky and presented a good target, yet she was impossible to attack. Her superpowerful Arkonide transmitters hammered on every available frequency, sending Rhodan's appeal to the people and to the M.S. Rhodan's voice drowned out every attempted interference up to the power of 3000 kws. They not only heard him in New York—the whole Earth heard him! And those who were still free, fell in with him. Three days of M.S. dictatorship in New York had been enough to convince them that only the

superiority of the New Power was able to save them successfully.

Mercant arrived with 100 detectors. The *Good Hope* brought another 300 that became available on Luna and in Canada.

The war in the sea of concrete broke into small individual confrontations. From street to street, from house to house and from room to room the confrontations continued. Rhodan's men came alone. And even though, after the first onrush, they came as no surprise, nevertheless they were the victors. Only a few of the M.S. continued to fight in the face of defeat. Most of them feared for their lives and clung to their host bodies, since their own were out of reach except for a few. The news of the kidnaping of 700 mindless body-shells on Luna and in Canada pushed the panic of the invaders to extremes. The M.S. were finished.

At exactly 12 o'clock noon, the mayor, the police chief and 7 senators were able to go on board the *Good Hope* and give their first reports of their experiences. The faces of the first few rescued men were flashed around the world via television. Everywhere people had left their jobs and rushed to their radios and TV sets in order to witness Rhodan's on-the-scene description of the battle between the New Yorkers and the invaders from outer space.

"The devil's reporter?" someone in the spaceship could be heard to remark and recalled to memory a famous radio scare of some decades past. But it was followed by a question mark. Already it contained the assurance that Rhodan's broadcast, which had been heard all over the world, was a serious matter.

It was the call to every individual on Earth, the hour of cosmic calling.

Today this fact penetrated into each and every private corner from Tokyo to Lisbon, from San Francisco to Moscow. *We are not alone in this world! There are others. And some of them are assuredly not of a friendly nature.*

A few minutes later Perry Rhodan directed a personal appeal to the governments of the world. He did this in his capacity of Prime Minister of the New Power. And he was successful. This time at last, the will of the people forced their elected representatives to go the way of Perry Rhodan in the Gobi Desert and finally to cooperate in uniting the peoples of the Earth.

The terms of defeat that had been presented to the M.S. were unequivocal and uncompromising. The monsters were given the opportunity to be picked up by one of their spaceships in a Mars orbit and be taken back to their own world. But despite this humane treatment, they did not fool themselves into thinking that they still had a chance against humanity. A pact dictated by Rhodan forced them back behind their cosmic borders.

"It is up to you," Rhodan concluded, "as to how you want to explain the facts to your government. Earthmen and Arkonides are allies and outlaw any violation against their individual jurisdictions. Remain within your own cosmic borders and you can have all of us as friends."

* * * *

The last emissaries of the Terran governments had left the Gobi Desert and taken with them conciliatory and hopeful messages for their countries. At that time 10 members of the Mutant Corps were standing in front of the *Good Hope*, which was ready for takeoff. They were to be transferred to Venus where they were to receive their final hypno-instructions thru the giant

positronic Brain and graduate to become members of the New Power's Secret Mutant Corps, after having completed their preliminary training courses.

" . . . for today and perhaps also for tomorrow we have been victorious," said Perry Rhodan in a sendoff speech. "But I must warn you that the Brain does not deny the possibility of renewed hostilities.

"For that reason we are dependent on each other. You & I! We must be strong and alert and . . . we must learn from this. Our path into the universe is long and dark. You must all help me to find it in safety!"

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ATLAN—The young Arkonide is reaching manhood without realizing that he is the long-sought Crystal Prince and rightful heir to the throne of Arkon

FRATULON—Atlan's mentor and protector, a versatile man of mystery

ICE CLAW—He has the touch of death

AZHIRA—A girl to be bartered for

PRONTIER—Azhira's father, whose treasures are not the usual kind

LAY MANOS—a 4-armed Manolian with not enough hands for his greed

Vafron—The dreaded henchman from afar

Plyturon—An ex-gladiator, like Fratulon

Kimyal—A Voolynesian monster with a false face

Noy Manos—Brother of the greedy one, also a Manolian

Ardelo & Waccor—Thieves of the treasure camps in the Marauthanian ruins

Farnathia—Atlan's childhood playmate and now the girl of his dreams

Armanck Declanter—The Tattor of Gortavor, Arkonide ruler of the planet

Skarg—The mysterious sword of Fratulon

Perry Rhodan

ATLAN

1

SPIDER DESERT

by Ernst Vlcek

ace books
A Division of Charter Communications Inc.
A GROSSET & DUNLAP COMPANY
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10036

SPIDER DESERT

Copyright © 1977 by Ace Books

An Ace Book by arrangement with Arthur Moewig Verlag

All Rights Reserved

PROLOG

In the Greater Imperium of the Arkonides it is the year 10496 A (for Arkon)—a time corresponding to the earthly year of 9003 BC. Thus it is a time in which the inhabitants of Earth are yet submerged in primitive barbarianism, knowing neither of the stars nor of the great heritage of vanished Lemuria.

By contrast—and despite the great war against the Maahks—Arkon is in its fullest prime. The present Imperator of this vast domain is Orbanoshol III, a man of brutality and cunning who is rumored to have instigated the death of his brother, Gonozal VII, in order to take over the rulership for himself.

Even though Orbanashol III has firmly established his dominion, there is one man whom the Emperor of Arkon still must fear: Atlan, the rightful heir to the throne. After Gonozal's death, this one had disappeared without a trace, along with the former physician to Gonozal VII.

But the death of his father had occurred during Atlan's earliest childhood, and he has no knowledge of his true origin. Having arrived to young manhood in the meantime, he lives with Fratulon, Gonozal's former physician, on a remote planet where he experiences a dangerous adventure in the SPIDER DESERT . . .

1/ BENEATH THE WEB

On this far planet a turning point had been reached in the saga of Fratulon:

Gortavor was a savage young world where Arkonide civilization and untamed Nature made provisional peace in a sort of mutual symbiosis. Inasmuch as the Arkonides had no particular interest in cultivating the planet or entering into a systematic colonization here, the area surrounding the spaceport was the only main center of their activity, supported merely by a minimal industry and the most indispensable of technical installations. By contrast, the maps of Gortavor indicated vast regions and lands unknown, which no Arkonide had ever explored.

Although an effective civilization had never taken hold here—or for that very reason—the planet experienced a lively influx of quasi immigrants and settlers representing a wide variety of peoples and races who hailed from all parts of the Greater Imperium as well as from distant regions of the galaxy beyond.

This questionable traffic consisted almost exclusively of irresponsible adventurers, frustrated misfits, lost derelicts and shady drifters of every description. It was such as these who stamped the overall character of the haphazard colonization, making of the planet a central distribution point for smugglers and undercover operators, a Paradise for thieves and swindlers, an asylum for murderers, outlaws and fugitives from justice in every walk of life.

Gortavor was located on the farflung outer ramparts of the Greater Imperium, which was why Fratulon had come here, as hunted as any man alive. Orbanashol

III, Imperator of the Arkonide Empire, had a very long arm, but apparently it had failed to reach this far. At least until now, Fratulon had remained beyond its grasp.

As personal physician to Armanck Declanter, he enjoyed both a great prestige and a certain degree of immunity. Armanck was referred to as the "Tatto," which was an official title given to all Arkonide planetary administrators, and as such he shielded him from danger.

However, even though Fratulon had lived thus in relative security for almost 13 years, he had never ceased to be wary and alert. His life was burdened by the shadows of the past, by memories which ticked constantly inside of him with the persistence of a time-bomb. And one day this bomb was going to ignite.

But the day and the hour had not quite arrived when that past could be brought to life. He would still have to maintain his silence. His secret would have to remain buried for just a while longer. But how much longer? Days, weeks, years?

No! Of this he was certain: before this present year was ended, he would have to reveal the truth to Atlan.

Ere long now, the day and the hour would be at hand . . .

* * * *

Behind us, Tarkihl lay on the horizon. Ahead lay the vast wasteland of the Spider Desert beneath its eerie silvery roof.

I sat tensely in the driver's seat of the dune-rover. The seat next to me had been taken by old "Sawbones," as I was wont to call my mentor, Fratulon. His face was expressionless as he stared out of our

cockpit enclosure. I would have given much to know what was stirring in that bald cranium of his.

As I looked at him askance, he glanced at me briefly with his yellowish eyes—still without expression.

"Are you thinking of the distress call, Fratulon?" I asked, merely to be saying something.

"I'm merely thinking," he answered, "that some humans out there are in trouble, and we have to help them."

I refrained from pressing him further. His silence didn't bother me. On the contrary, I was actually glad to be able to concentrate on our journey. To drive a dune-rover was comparative child's play. The tractor vehicle was low in contour, not much higher than a man and about as wide with a length of 18 feet. Its ground traction was such that it could negotiate almost any obstacle, and for this reason it was especially suited for travel through desert sands. But even so, there was a certain element of risk in making this thrust into the Spider Desert.

Aside from countless unknown dangers, there was a constant menace here which had given the desert its name. At an average height of 2 meters over the ground was a vast net of silvery strands as thick as an arm which stretched across the entire desert region. No one knew who had placed the net here or what purpose it served originally. It was suspected, however, that its designers had been those same beings who had created Tarkihl.

Many a soldier of fortune had set out to find the end or beginning of the mysterious net, but none of them had ever returned. The silvery strands still retained their secret. But one thing had been learned concerning their nature. At times this apparently self-contained network would begin to hum and vibrate. The eerie sound of the vibrations gripped all forms of life in some

sort of a trance, causing hallucinations which had been fatal to countless desert wanderers.

I myself had never experienced the humming song of this spidery web, but I couldn't imagine how a person could fall under its spell if one were to exert the necessary force of will against it.

When I once expressed these thoughts to Fratulon, he had answered: "Many who were older and stronger than you have fallen prey to it, Atlan." This had been earlier, on another occasion, but at the time it had vexed me because it seemed that he underestimated my abilities.

Since then he appeared to have altered his opinion of me. Nowadays it often seemed to me that he regarded me as an equal. Like this morning when the distress call had reached Tarkihl from somewhere in the desert. He had not objected to my taking the controls of the rover. I considered it as a form of silent recognition and it filled me with pride. Therefore I determined to substantiate his new-found confidence in me and to bring the machine safely to its destination.

In the seat behind me, the chretkor monstrosity stirred uncomfortably. "It's hot in here," he grumbled. "At this temperature I'm liable to melt away."

I could not suppress a grin as I thought of the creature we had nicknamed "Ice Claw." His fear of extremes of heat and cold had become almost pathological. However, I did him the favor of increasing the air-conditioning, although at the start of our trip he'd complained about the low temperature and I had turned up the heat.

"Is that to your liking, noble sir?" I inquired sarcastically.

"Thanks, Atlan," said Ice Claw, without taking issue over my tone of voice. "I can feel my bodily structure returning to a solid state."

Suddenly a sand dune loomed ahead that reached almost to the silvery net above.

"Go around it," said Fratulon.

But I only laughed. "The rover will have that dune for breakfast!"

We reached the towering obstruction and I cut in the suction jets. Mounted laterally on the exterior of the caterpillar treads, they served chiefly to clear away such dunes as this. I throttled down our speed while the suction jets began to howl and pull down the slope before us. The sand was conducted through a system of tubes to the rear of the rover where it was then ejected by blowers.

Suddenly there was a tinkling sound and the jet howl became a thundering roar, causing the dune-rover to vibrate.

"What's that!?" I cried out in astonishment, glancing questioningly at Fratulon.

However, before I could get an answer from him I saw through the pall of powdery sand dust ahead and made out several shadowy figures approaching our machine. And then I knew: the sand dune was a trap set up by the desert dwellers.

Without much further deliberation I backed up the rover, withdrawing completely from the dune. Turning at a 90 degree angle I moved away at high speed. However, I had hardly emerged from the haze of dust before another dune loomed directly in our path. Managing just barely to avoid it I accidentally ran down a desert dweller who had suddenly appeared in front of the tractor. His wide cloak spread out and fluttered momentarily and I saw his tortured face quite plainly before he disappeared under the ponderous treads. The rover rolled over him as we reached an open area. Ahead of us were no further obstacles. But I sped onward as though pursued by all the demons of the

nether worlds.

"You can slow down now," said Fratulon. "The danger is past."

I dropped speed and gave him an angry glance. "Why didn't you warn me before?" I asked irritably. "You knew the dune was a trap set up by the desert dwellers. You must have known they'd hide a lot of junk in the sand so as to foul up our suction jets. Why didn't you draw it to my attention?"

"I thought you'd recognize the trap on your own," answered Fratulon calmly.

Although he did not speak reproachfully I nevertheless took it as an admonishment. "Alright," I said, "I didn't see it as a trap right away, but when the situation became critical I reacted properly. Without any support from you I was able to get this rover out of the danger zone."

"Therefore you are deserving of my fullest respect and appreciation," he replied. "And yet, I have gained from the incident something that is a consolation to me."

"What do you mean?" I asked belligerently.

"The fact that the pupil has not quite surpassed his teacher."

We locked glances for a moment, and suddenly we had to laugh. Until now I had only regarded Fratulon as my mentor and guide, as my protector and even as a sort of father. But in this moment I noted that our mutual relationship had changed. It had become a comradeship between two men.

"I'm cold," came Ice Claw's complaint from the back seat. "I fear that my body will freeze into a solid block."

I sighed, wiping the sweat from my forehead, and turned the air-conditioner to the hot side.

2/ STRANGE PARTNERS IN A STRANGE LAND

Fratulon perceived the approaching moment of destiny:

He had given Atlan a thorough course of training and education. He had instructed him in all branches of science, he had schooled him in all the martial disciplines and shared with him his own vast fund of experience. At age 17 Atlan was now a full-fledged, high-calibre specimen of manhood. He no longer needed his training master and could now but increase his development through his own experience.

Fratulon could not do much more for him. Atlan would have to build his personality from his own reserves and intuition. And yet—it was necessary to make one final manipulation of his fate which was of the greatest magnitude of all. In order to shape his future, Fratulon knew he must conjure up the ghosts of the past . . .

* * * *

"Look there!" exclaimed Fratulon as he pointed ahead.

The sun had risen by now to an angle where it caused the silvery strands of the net to cast confusing shadows onto the desert sands, and thus my perception of details ahead was difficult. Thinking that my companion had discovered another obstacle, I slowed down abruptly. But then I saw what he was pointing at.

Through one of the regular openings in the net I could make out the form of a large bird of prey which was perched on one of the arm-thick cables. It was no longer alive and seemed to be bleached out, withered and more or less mummified.

I steered the rover underneath it as we drove along.

Sights such as this were not unusual in the Spider Desert. Although I had not yet experienced the hypnotic effects of the silver strands I had certainly seen many creatures who had become victims of the web in one way or another. Lurking in those shining filaments was a sinister power of death. Whoever or whatever came in contact with them was irretrievably lost. The victim's blood seemed to evaporate with the seiftness of thought, and that which was left behind was a withered corpse. A fast way of dying but nevertheless terribel.

I caught myself thinking what might happen to Ice Claw if he were to contact the web. Within his talons was a power that was similar to that of the net above us.

"Are you hot or cold now?" I inquired of him.

"Neither one," he answered to my surprise. "The temperature is just right."

I turned to look at him but had to turn away quickly as though I were Perseus observing the Medusa. Although I was accustomed to his appearance, in such a brief glance it had not been possible for me to distinguish his facial features in the crystal transparency of his head.

Ice Claw's nickname was not alone due to the fact that all organic substance that he grasped with his claw-like hands became ice. Also in his appearance he seemed to have been sculptured from a block of ice. His head, body and limbs were completely transparent, and as a consequence his interior presented a startling but colorful maze of muscles, nerve fibres, arteries and vital organs. Moreover, it was not always easy for his closest acquaintances to glean much of his mood or expression from looking at his face. The transparency of his head deceived the eye so that it was difficult to determine whether his various sense organs were interior or exterior.

His shape was more or less humanoid although dwarfish. When standing at his full height he just came up to my chest.

Although it seemed incongruous, Ice Claw loved warmth. The warmer it was the more agile he became. Yet he feared any extreme of heat because he suspected that he might melt away. On the other hand, his fear of very low temperatures was equally as great because he believed that under such conditions the slightest jolt might send him shattering into nothing but splinters and crystals of ice.

His chief concern was always this phobia regarding heat and cold. Because he just couldn't cope with it mentally he talked about it continually and as far as circumstances allowed he kept on requesting new adjustments of the temperature.

Inasmuch as the chretkor had no name, or perhaps to defend him against others he might have had, such as "spook," "Iceman," or even "Anatomy Chart," we simply and quite aptly called him Ice Claw.

"Is that the right temperature setting for you?" I inquired.

"Yes, quite. I feel excellent at the moment," he answered brusquely. "Why do you keep on asking? Are you making fun of me?"

I raised my hands in a mock gesture of defense. But before I could counter his remark, Fratulon interrupted.

"Are you sure of your course, Atlan?"

"Absolutely."

I waited for him to elaborate on his question but he remained silent. It could well be that something had come to his attention that had escaped me. So I checked all the instruments again but could not detect anything that would indicate a deviation from our course.

"We're traveling toward the Marauthanian ruins," I

told him. "That's the direction the distress call came from."

As he nodded, his chubby double chin was noticeable. Fratulon was about a head shorter than I was and fairly corpulent in appearance. He might have been called fat unless one happened to know that his bulk consisted chiefly of muscles and that he possessed tremendous strength.

His head was bald, but by contrast the lower half of his face was overgrown with a black, luxurious beard. His shrewd yellow eyes were almost obscured by a welter of chubby wrinkles.

He did not attach much importance to the matter of clothing. If one were to draw comparisons between him and the Arkonide aristocrats who flaunted themselves around Tarkihl in a virtual frenzy of ostentation he might have appeared to be quite pitiably attired. He always wore one and the same set of harness which had obviously been forged a considerable number of years ago. When confronted with the question as to why he would never be separated from his battered and time-worn breast armor, he would only remark that it was a reminder of better days.

When we were alone together, even I could not elicit any details from him concerning such things. I had long since given up the idea of ever pumping him for his story. If he did not wish to air his secret of his own accord, then he could leave it buried where it was.

In Tarkihl the wildest rumors circulated concerning Fratulon. Whereas many of them were absurdities of the most shocking kind, still others carried a grain of truth. No one knew where he had come from or what he had been engaged in formerly. But he made no secret of the fact that he had once been a successful gladiator. In connection with those earlier days he had told me the

most incredible stories. As a lad I had been so fascinated by them that I had sworn I would follow in his footsteps and even top his heroic deeds.

It seemed strange to me that when I had taken this oath at the tender age of ten he had nevertheless considered it seriously. I could still remember a remark of his that had made a lasting impression on me.

"One day when you are a grown man, Atlan," he had declared, "you will surpass me in everything—of that I am sure. You will be more courageous and intelligent and will have a stronger will and vitality. And you will be in dire need of every bit of it because ahead of you is a thorny and dangerous road. But as much as it lies within my power to do so, I shall arm and prepare you for your task in life."

I never did learn what he had meant by these intimations, but he had kept his promise and had been an outstanding teacher and trainer. He had transmitted to me his knowledge as a physician, a scientist and a philosopher, to the point where I had been able to work in Tarkihl as his assistant. He had also taught me how to fight and to use my powers of reason.

However, when I would press him for specifics of his past he would tighten his jaw and hold his silence.

I had him to thank for having taken me in from the age of four and raised me. But I could not believe that he knew nothing of my origin. He persistently maintained that I had been a complete orphan with no living or traceable parents at the time he had found me somewhere on Gortavor, but in the very next breath he would make some mysterious allusion to factors that he refused to elaborate on.

But as I say I had outgrown the time when I would press him with such questions. Now and again, however, when the opportunity presented itself, I would

still attempt to trick him by artful and devious means. But even when he failed to see through my deception he would become as silent as the Spider Desert.

Fratulon was purported to be incredibly wealthy, but there was no more proof of that supposition than there was for any of the other stories that were told about him. There were even some who maintained that he wasn't an Arkonide, and considering his thick-set and stubby figure this was not entirely unbelievable. But this only caused Fratulon to laugh to himself, and he would say nothing to the contrary.

His most curious possession was the sword he wore. It was short with a broad blade and a pommel that bore a strange carving on it. This figure appeared to be worked in silver, but even under the closest inspection its details could not be clearly made out. On the contrary, the more carefully one studied it the more indistinct its contours became.

I had myself fought with Skarg, as Fratulon called the weapon, but could discover nothing unusual about it other than the fact that it sat very well in my hand.

"It's hot," announced Ice Claw again.

Automatically, I regulated the air-conditioning for him.

Before us lay the monotonous landscape of sand, still overshadowed by the endless web of silvery strands. But its aspect had changed in the meantime. A wind had come up and was driving dust devils and a haze of sand before it. The visibility lessened as the sun shone faintly through the dust clouds.

"The wind is increasing," I announced concernedly. "I think it won't be long before it turns into a sandstorm."

"You could be right," agreed Fratulon. "Whenever you feel like it I can relieve you at the controls."

I was grateful for his offer. Not that I didn't trust

myself to guide the rover even through the storm. It was just that my powers of concentration were lagging somewhat after the long drive, and it might do me some good to relax a while.

I pulled the rover to a stop and got out in order to go around to the other side, but just as I did so the ground suddenly gave way under my feet. I strove to hang on to the tractor treads of the machine but had already sunk down up to my waist.

The crystalline face of Ice Claw appeared in the cockpit hatch. He leaned way out and downward toward me, stretching out his hand-like talons. I hesitated, mindful of his capability of turning all organic matter to ice that he touched, but of course my fears were groundless because just now Ice Claw had his strange powers under control. Yet by the time I realized that, I had sunk deeper and could no longer reach his "hand".

Suddenly there was a grinding and rumbling sound from below, and the dune-rover sank on its side. The ground beneath me finally gave away and I dropped through a cloud of sand into the depths.

3/ IN THE LOST LABYRINTHS

Fratulon would soon mend the last chink in his armor, or test its strength once and for all.

Long ago when he had fled to Gortavor with the 4-year-old manchild in his keeping, the intent behind it all was to raise Atlan until the time should come to help him regain his own right and station. The first few years had been the most difficult because Fratulon had stood alone against an overwhelmingly powerful enemy. It had been a long, hard struggle until he finally established himself on Gortavor to the point where he could offer Atlan a maximum degree of protection.

He became an influential personality on Gortavor. His position as personal physician to the Tatto, Armanck Declanter, had made him practically unassailable. A portion of his prestige and influence had been transmitted to his young ward, Atlan, whom he had presumably found in the wilderness of this world.

Fratulon's camouflage was practically armor-plated, with just one vulnerable spot: Atlan.

The youth's childhood memories kept emerging in such multiple forms as dreams and thought associations. The questions he asked both as a child and a strapping youth maturing to manhood continued to create problems for Fratulon. But now the period of all these difficulties was drawing to an end—he had successfully withstood the burdens of it. He was glad that he would not have to maintain his silence much longer . . .

* * * *

I dropped onto soft sand, breaking the impact with the natural resiliency of my legs. But further masses of sand came down upon me and I threw my arms over my face for protection and in order to breathe as I staggered forward through the gritty debris into the cavern that lay before me.

From above came a grinding sound and as I looked up I saw the vast shadow of the dune-rover settling further into the opening of the cave-in. I knew I had to move onward to get out of the way because the weight of the vehicle was liable to cause a further collapse of the ceiling.

I finally got out of the zone of danger, but since my visibility was poor I ran blindly into an obstacle. It was a wall of molten sand that had cooled into a glass-hard surface that bristled with countless sharp splinters. In the process, I cut my hand.

I heard another grating and crunching sound and knew that the rover was slipping through. It came down with a crash and wedged itself between the wall and the rubble. After everything had settled and only the howling of the storm outside was audible, I heard Fratulon calling.

"Atlan!"

"I'm down here," I answered. "I think I'm all in one piece."

"At least that's something!" I heard him remark.

Immediately after that I saw a powerful shape come through a dimly lighted opening next to the semi-suspended rover. For a moment the muscular short legs seemed to wriggle in the air; then the shadowy figure came down with a thud. Behind him came a slender, translucent shape: Ice Claw.

"What is this place?" asked the chretkor.

"I figure it's some sort of underground hideout that could have been made by treasure hunters," I an-

swered, while carefully running my hands over the glassy sand wall. "It has every appearance of having been carved out with heat beam weapons."

"No wonder the ceiling couldn't support the weight of the rover," grumbled Fratulon. A pocket light flashed to life in his hand, and its powerful beam penetrated the vaulted excavation. "Now we're in a fine mess. We won't be able to retrieve that rover all by ourselves."

I looked about in the cavern. Discounting the part that had caved in, it was still large enough to hold about 20 men. Fairly wide and elongated, it ended in a passage that turned to our left.

"At least we can wait out the storm down here," commented Ice Claw, and he added with satisfaction: "Anyway, it's pleasantly cool in here."

"That sandstorm can go on all day," retorted Fratulon irritably. "We haven't got that much time. After all we aren't out here on a picnic, you know. We're trying to rescue some treasure hunters who've sent out a call for help."

"But a dead sawbones isn't going to do them much good, either," I replied. "Don't you think, Doc, that we ought to take a little breather? The sandstorm seems to have reached its peak. It would be suicide to set out into the Spider Desert under these conditions. You yourself have said that friction with the sand out there builds up a static charge on a person, which provides a conductor for the forces in the web strands over head."

He stared at me in surprise. "You are aware of that?" he asked, wonderingly. "Of course you're right, Atlan. We have to wait at least until the storm gets past its high point. Only then will it be possible to continue onward on foot."

"Then let's take a look around down here," I sug-

gested. I borrowed Fratulon's flashlight and went to the end of the cave.

When I turned the beam of the flashlight into the narrow side passage I was disappointed to discover that it was only about 10 paces in extent, ending in another wall of solidified molten sand.

Fratulon appeared beside me. He shouldered past me and entered the tunnel which was so narrow that he almost grazed the walls with his shoulders. When he came to the end of it he drew his sword and struck the glazed surface several times with it. Several fist-sized fragments splintered away from the wall.

Suddenly he leapt back nimbly, replaced his sword, and brought forth his raygun. At first his action was puzzling to me because his wide body blocked my view, but then I saw that cracks were appearing in the wall through which a mass of loose sand was pouring into the passage.

Fratulon fired a wide-spread energy beam at it. I thought he was merely trying to melt the sand and stop its flow, but he wasn't satisfied with that. He simply vaporized it and melted his way in further. When he finally shut off his weapon I saw that he had made an opening that gave access to a cavern beyond. I aimed the flashlight beam through it and caught sight of a smooth floor and walls that were fashioned of some dull-shining unknown material.

"Zagooth, the lost labyrinth," muttered Fratulon.

I looked at him questioningly but he gave me no explanation. Without wasting any words, he thrust himself through the opening and slid over the pile of sandy rubble into the cave on the other side.

* * * *

This cavern was larger and lay deeper under the surface than the sand-glazed hideout we had traversed

in order to get here. Two separate passages, twice the height of a man and equally as wide, led off to the right and the left in exactly opposite directions.

"What does Zagooth mean?" I inquired of Fratulon. "I have never heard the name before."

"I only learned about it myself for the first time a few years ago, from a treasure hunter," he explained. "It's long been known that the Spider Desert covers a subterranean maze of labyrinths, but so far only a few half-buried fragments of it have been discovered. This dying treasure hunter asserted, however, that while investigating the secret of the deadly net of silvery strands he had come across charts of the original inhabitants here, and on that basis he had at least partially traced out the course of the labyrinths. But he couldn't continue his explorations of them because he fell into the hands of the desert dwellers and barely managed to escape and get back to Tarkihl."

"You never told me anything about that before," I said in a slight tone of reproachfulness.

This elicited only a faint smile from him, almost as if he were trying to tell me there were far greater things than this he had remained silent about. I could even accept that, but was vexed by the fact that he couldn't have confided in me concerning such a relatively minor item as this incident with the dying treasure hunter. Of course it could also be that he hadn't considered it worth mentioning, since it was not unusual that adventurers in the Spider Desert should be attacked by Zagors and Ooths.

"I have it!" I cried out suddenly. "The word Zagooth is a composite made up from the names of the desert dwellers—Zagors, and Ooths. But why were the labyrinths named after them? After all, they were built by the original inhabitants."

"But the Zagors and the Ooths live here," declared

Fratulon. He indicated the tunnel that led off to the right. "If we're lucky, maybe the labyrinths here are not choked up for considerable distances, and we may be able to cover a good stretch of the way toward the Marauthanian ruins. Using the compass we can get our bearings and won't have to be afraid of getting lost. Atlan, would you go back to the rover and fetch some of our gear? We only need the essentials—water and food for a day, the compass, and my first-aid kit."

I clambered back over the sand heap and hurried through the first cavern to the cave-in. The storm had blown in more sand, but the rover had not settled any deeper. I drew myself up on the caterpillar treads and ducked my head down against the storm, finally reaching the cockpit hatch and climbing inside.

It only required a few moments to gather the equipment and supplies together that we would need, and it didn't take much longer to stow them in a back pack and strap the whole thing over my shoulders. I was about to retrace my steps when I chanced to see another flashlight. I picked it up and took it along since it couldn't hurt to have two of the hand lights with us.

When I climbed out of the cupola it seemed to me that the storm was blowing harder. The sand whipped at me savagely, forcing me to close my eyes and hold my breath. I only dared to take a good breath of air after I had gotten down into the cave again. I quickly covered the short distance to the narrow side passage, but after taking a few steps inside I came to a halt.

Ahead of me everything lay in darkness. Why didn't Fratulon have the other flashlight turned on? Cautiously, I groped my way forward to the opening at the end of the tunnel. Then I listened. I had an impression of some furtive rustling or scraping sound, as though something were coming nearer.

I suddenly turned on my hand light. In its beam I

perceived two Ooths who were creeping forward and had just reached the slope of sand before me. When the light fell upon them they jerked back and protectively raised boney hands in front of their faces.

Ooths were mutated Arkonides. They were reputed to be descendants of treasure hunters, whose physiology had been altered by radiations from the silver web. They looked like the mummified cadavers that had come in contact with the strands. Their faces were distorted masks that were devoid of nose, eyes and ears. The teeth in their wide, lipless mouths were powerful enough to sever a man's arm with a single bite.

They only came to the surface during the night because light had the effect of blinding them and causing their bodily substance to decompose. Darkness was their element. They were night creatures who guided themselves by ultra-sound.

When I perceived the nature of my opponents, all I had to do was aim the beam of my flashlight at them in order to put them to flight. They cried out as the full intensity of the rays struck them and retreated in horrified panic into the lefthand side passage. I waited until the sound of their running feet had faded away, after which I negotiated the pile of debris and came down into the larger cavern.

There was no trace of Fratulon and Ice Claw.

I went to the mouth of the tunnel that led off toward the Marauthanian ruins. *"Fratulon!"* I shouted.

There was no answer. When I flashed my light further into the passage I saw a shadow flit into another side corridor. An Ooth . . .

I couldn't imagine that Fratulon had been overcome by the mutants, who feared nothing more than light. What had happened here during my absence?

I couldn't find any evidence that a struggle had occurred, so I finally turned to the righthand tunnel. If

Fratulon had found some reason for leaving the cavern, then he must have used this passage, since it led toward the ruins we were heading for.

The tunnel led straight ahead, but I soon came upon a cross-passage. I swiftly turned my light beam into it in both directions and saw more Ooths hastily ducking out of the illumination into the safety of darkness.

There was nothing to be seen of Fratulon and Ice Claw. At the next cross passage the same experience was repeated. Three Ooths had been lying in ambush for me there, but again the beam of the hand light sent them screaming and fleeing in terror.

"Fratulon!"

Still no answer.

I became uneasy. I couldn't understand how old Sawbones and the chretkor could simply disappear. I had not been gone long enough for them to have covered much distance in the tunnel. They simply had to hear my calls!

In my perplexity I wandered into a side passage. Instead of being straight, however, it twisted in a serpentine fashion so that I could only see a few paces ahead. It seemed that I could hear sounds ahead of me which receded as I progressed. Therefore I began to move along more swiftly.

Just now it was immaterial who might be ahead of me. It made no difference whether it was an Ooth or a Zagor. I would intercept him and try to find out from him if he knew anything about what happened to Fratulon and Ice Claw.

When I came around the next bend I saw that the tortuous passage suddenly came to an end. Right in front of me was an Ooth who was desperately trying to climb up the smooth wall. He supported himself against the wall with his legs and arms and even managed to ascend a few feet, but then he slipped back again.

Then he realized that he was cornered and faced me ready to fight. Shielding his light-sensitive face with his hands, he turned toward me and crouched, prepared to spring in attack.

I pressed against the seamless wall while holding the hand lamp away from me. Since the light blinded him he would have to focus his charge in that direction, presuming me to be still in the middle of the passage.

In the very moment that he started his leap, a hand reached out of the wall and pulled me through with a mighty tug. It was not actually fingers that covered my mouth, but talons. I was surrounded by darkness. Yet strangely the passage I had just vacated was still illuminated by my flashlight. As though through a glass wall I saw the Ooth jump and grasp at emptiness.

Then I heard a cry that shook me to the marrow. A human cry—sounding as though it came from the lips of a woman.

4/ THE GIRL IN THE ARENA

The relationship between master and pupil was subtly changing.

Fratulon continued more and more to be amazed by Atlan's progress. It was often just little things that elicited the teacher's silent appreciation and admiration, but even when Atlan made decisions concerning matters of minor importance he demonstrated that each of his actions was the result of careful deliberation, at the same time being able to make up his mind in a hurry.

Fratulon recognized the fact that Atlan's basic education and training had come to an end and that he could no longer import anything new to him. Now Atlan would have to put his knowledge to practical use. Out of his successes or failures would come the further lessons of his life ahead.

And Atlan learned so swiftly that Fratulon could only admire him in silent wonderment. All of which enabled the master to lay aside his role of teacher, more and more. Gradually he could bring into emergence the actual relationship between them: he was Atlan's loyal and devoted servant . . .

* * * *

"Silence! There are Zagors here!" someone whispered to me, and I recognized the voice of Fratulon.

I experienced an unutterable relief at having found old Sawbones again. Actually it was he who had found me and pulled me into his hiding place, but just now it was a moot point.

Ice Claw removed his hard, cold hand from my

mouth and turned off the flashlight that I was still hanging onto. I was incapacitated from my surprise.

"Wh-where . . . "I started to say, but Fratulon shushed me to silence.

It was only then that I had a chance to look about in my new surroundings. I found myself in a giant cavern. Behind me was a wall that appeared to swallow up all light that impinged upon it. Over me arched a great vaulted ceiling that I seemed to sense rather than see, because it, too, appeared to be composed of the same sort of absolutely dark material. In spite of this there was a pleasant and shadowless illumination here which seemed to come from no particular source yet appeared to emerge from everywhere.

The large chamber had the appearance of an auditorium or an arena, tapering downward toward the center in a basin-like formation. Instead of rows of seats in the circle, however, there were a number of convex elevations and hump-shaped rises on which there were various protuberances. Hunching and crouching on these were the tall, lean figures of reptile creatures wearing broad cloak-like garments.

Zagors!

There must have been about 20 of them sitting on the humps near the central floor of the chamber. They uttered inarticulate sounds in some kind of chant while beating time with their throwing and cutting weapons. Their great unblinking eyes glowed with a ghostly greenish light as they gazed intently at the girl who lay in the arena's center.

The agonized cry I had heard must have come from her.

She lay stretched out on the ground, breathing laboriously. Her clothes hung in shreds from her body. Close to her head, a spear was stuck in the ground. As I looked at her, she grasped the shaft with her hands,

supporting herself by it as she slowly got up. Meanwhile her eyes fearfully swept over the row of lizard-like creatures who watched her with a predatory intentness.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet and attempted to escape from the central area. She clambered onto the first rise, eluded a Zagor who sought to block her, pressed through a gap between several of them, and scaled the next tier beyond.

One of the Zagors had followed her and when he came within range he thrust a barbed spear at her. The barb caught in her tattered cloak, jerking her back. The material tore loose, but the girl slipped backwards over the raised tier and into the arena again.

As she did so she screamed in mortal terror.

The Zagors loomed over her from right and left, striking out at her clothing with daggres, swords and lances. They were very adept at this and did not pierce the girl's skin with a single thrust. In spite of this her arms and legs and face were already badly bruised and scratched.

When she lay still on the ground once more, the Zagors withdrew from her.

"We can't just stand here doing nothing while those monsters torture the girl," I said, preparing to take action.

Ice Claw grasped my arm and detained me. "Fratulon is always saying that you are calm and collected in every situation," whispered the chretkor. "But it seems to me that only applies when a girl isn't involved."

I shook him off. "I'd help any human in a case like this," I declared.

"Undoubtedly," Fratulon answered, "but don't you think, Atlan, that we should wait for a more favorable moment?"

I had finally collected myself and realized that of course they were both right. It wouldn't help the girl to just make a blind charge against the Zagors. We had to proceed with more intelligent tactics. Zagors weren't as easily intimidated as the Ooths. They neither shied away from light nor feared any kind of energy weapon.

"What do you suggest, Fratulon?" I asked.

He looked at me in some astonishment and said, "What do *you* suggest?"

For a moment I was surprised he had left the decision to me, yet I didn't dwell on my reaction too long. Instead, I considered what we might do to help the girl.

She was an Arkonide woman, that I had easily determined—and she must have been beautiful before the Zagors had mistreated her so.

I recalled to mind what I knew concerning the Zagors. They were fairly primitive and only had crude weapons such as swords and spears. Initially they had lived in the jungle regions of Gortavor, but they had moved into the Spider Desert along with the treasure hunters and busied themselves here with robbery and plundering. Their total source of livelihood was the booty they won from their pillaging forays. No caravan or expedition was safe from them.

If they took prisoners it was only to sacrifice them to the silver strands of the web, in which they seemed to perceive their deity. The ritual involved was crude and horrifying. First they pursued the victim until its resistance was broken, after which they exposed it to the deadly forces of the net.

I shuddered to think that we had barely escaped this fate, ourselves. It had been none other than the Zagors who had planted damaging scrap in the sand dune in an attempt to disable the rover. If they had succeeded in stopping us, by now we would have been bleached mummies.

It was such a fate that now threatened the girl if we didn't manage to set her free.

"How long will it be before they sacrifice her?" I asked.

"The girl is at the end of her strength," said Fratulon. "Under normal circumstances they'd have taken her to the surface long before this, but I presume they are waiting for the storm to die down."

I nodded in agreement, having had the same idea. "Then that may give us enough time to work out my plan."

"What do you have in mind?" inquired Fratulon.

I did not give him an answer. It was gratifying for a change to turn the tables on him and leave him in the dark as to my intentions. Instead, I asked: "That secret door you pulled me through—does it also work in the other direction? Do you think Ice Claw could go back into the passage I came through?"

"I don't see why not," answered Fratulon as he furrowed his brow thoughtfully. "He had to reach through it to get you. But it isn't a secret door exactly, it's more like a matter projection, acting like a curtain that holds back both light and sound."

"That's good enough for me," I interrupted, and turned to the chretkor. "I want you to go back into that passage and drive as many Ooths into it as you can find. Take both flashlights with you. With those you can drive them before you like cattle. Do you think you can do it?"

"There's a pleasant climate in Zagooth," replied Ice Claw. "Down here I feel at my best." So saying, he disappeared through the apparently impenetrable wall.

* * * *

The Zagors drummed a wild cadence with their weapons, obviously attempting to startle their victim

into renewed effort. But the girl lay panting on the ground and did not move. When she raised her head once, the reptiles uttered a shout of triumph. But immediately thereafter they grumbled in disappointment when they saw that the girl was apparently too weak to get up again.

I turned to my friend and mentor, Sawbones. "Fratulon, do you know how many exits there are?"

He shrugged. "I've discovered two of them, on the other side between the rows of humps. The Zagors have guards over there—but there are probably other outlets."

"That's not so important. The main thing is to know which way we are to go, once we've freed the girl. In any case we have to go to the opposite side of this chamber." As I started away with him, I asked: "How did you two ever get into this place?"

"When you went back to the rover, the Zagors showed up," he told me. "Not wishing to get into a fight with them, we withdrew into the outer tunnel, merely intending to remain concealed. But then we saw that they had a prisoner with them, so we followed them. Then suddenly our retreat was cut off because a second group of Zagors came behind us. We were suddenly at the end of the winding passage, but since the Zagors who had preceded us couldn't have evaporated into thin air I searched until I found the 'secret door,' as you call it."

Under cover of the hump-shaped elevations we had almost reached the opposite side of the cavern when we heard the girl let out another scream. When I glanced down into the arena I was in time to see a Zagor jump in front of the girl and sweep his cloak aside to take out his sword. I knew he wasn't intending to kill her but I was sure he meant to add to her pain by goading her with the sword point.

This I simply couldn't permit. Before Fratulon could prevent it, I jerked out my raygun and quickly fired. A narrow beam of energy flashed out and struck the reptile's skull. The Zagor dropped as though hit by lightning. The others became still for a moment as though struck dumb, but soon a bedlam of shouting arose. They lifted their weapons as if to defend themselves against an invisible enemy, and some of them timorously examined their dead companion.

"That was ill-considered," said Fratulon reprovingly.

"Not at all," I retorted, grinning at him. "You know you're the one who taught me that trick—how to fire off a needle beam so nobody but the victim notices it."

Fratulon had another objection on the tip of his tongue, but he refrained from expressing it.

We finally reached the other side. The Zagors had settled down again, having adjusted themselves primitively to the death of their companion. But none of them came near the girl any more.

I could see by her terrified expression that she would have liked nothing better than to run away from this place, but she was by now too weak to attempt it.

"I hope Ice Claw didn't get lost in the labyrinth," I remarked.

Fratulon merely shook his head.

The Zagors started in again to make the drumming sound with their weapons. The girl buried her head in her hands and closed her ears, which caused the reptile creatures to redouble their noisemaking. Their inarticulate cries became louder and wilder.

Two of them suddenly sprang from their seats down into the arena. As the girl saw the flash of their weapons, she gathered herself together and prepared to flee—which was exactly the Zagors' purpose. I clenched my fists, fearing that there would be a repeti-

tion of the hideous game I had interrupted before. But this time they didn't get that far.

On the other side of the cavern, precisely where Ice Claw had gone through the curtain of projected matter, there was a commotion. A figure appeared, then another, and another, followed by still others. Soon there were 10 Ooths pressing forward between the tiers of protruding structures at the top of the amphitheater.

When they saw themselves suddenly surrounded by the shadowless light, they sought to draw back, but others of their kind came through and blocked their retreat, pressing them further forward. Then Ice Claw appeared with his two brilliant hand lights, making it impossible for them to return whence they had come. The Ooths had no alternative but to climb down the tiers in search of another exit.

"Now's the time," I said. "Get ready, Sawbones!"

Meanwhile, the Zagors had discovered the mutants. They ignored the girl and charged toward their assumed attackers. However, rather than brace themselves for a fight they staked their chances on flight alone. The light streaming at them from everywhere weakened their senses and added physical pain to their suffering. The only thing they could think of was to flee from the flood of light and return to the security of darkness. In their desperate confusion they kept running against the walls of blackness which absorbed all light.

"Now!" I shouted.

I leapt from my concealment onto one of the elevated tiers. Jumping from one rounded hump to another, I reached the floor of the arena, where the girl crouched in a half-raised position, looking on in bewilderment at the strange battle between the Zagors and the Ooths.

"Don't be afraid!" I called to her. "We'll get you out of this!"

When she whirled around toward me and screamed, I

was puzzled by her reaction, wondering why she should fear me. But then I realized she was staring beyond me, and when I turned I saw a Zagor swinging at me with his sword. Just as the blade reached the highest point of its arc, the reptile fell back, struck down by a shot from Fratulon.

"Keep covering me, Sawbones!" I shouted to him, then turned once more to the girl. Helping her to her feet, I asked her: "Can you walk by yourself?"

She took one step and fell into my arms, whereupon I simply lifted her up and draped her over my shoulder.

Fratulon had come to my side. He had holstered his energy weapon in favor of one he trusted more. In his hand was Skarg. In his eyes blazed a martial challenge. But there was no time for words as he turned to ward off an attack by two of the Zagors. One of them fell under a swift side thrust, and the other went down beneath a direct blow through the shoulder.

"Let's get out of here, Ice Claw!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. I hadn't seen the chretkor since his return but hoped he'd be able to fend for himself in the fray.

Fratulon arrived at a man-sized opening between two pillar-like structures. The first thing the Zagor sentinel there accomplished was to run straight into his sword. Old Sawbones beckoned to me and then disappeared through the opening.

I had just reached this exit when I heard a beastly cry behind me, and suddenly something grasped my leg. I lost my balance but managed to turn as I fell. The Zagor who clutched me had his spear raised in a position to run me through, but he was suddenly deterred. A small, slender shape fell upon his back as two crystalline arms encircled his neck. A visible shudder ran through the Zagor, after which he dropped to the ground and remained still. The chretkor had killed the reptile by merely touching it.

"Thanks, Ice Claw," I said.

I got up with my burden and hurried through the exitway. Ice Claw kept behind me to cover our rear flank, but the Zagors did not pursue us. Apparently they were too occupied with the Ooths.

The girl on my shoulder did not stir, since she had lost consciousness.

Before us stretched a very long hall that glowed in the shadowless light. The ground seemed to exhibit a rippled or wavy configuration in an inconsistent pattern of large and small humps which extended over the walls and ceiling, as well. Between these at haphazard distances from each other were a number of odd-shaped openings.

The weird aspect of this chamber, suggesting a sort of organic growth, had the effect of making me dizzy. Suddenly I lost all sense of up or down. The elevations and declivities of the floor and the walls, the eerie light—all these impressions confused my senses to such a degree that I became disoriented and lost my balance.

"Over here!" I heard Fratulon cry out.

But I couldn't see him. The contours of my surroundings swam before my eyes. I shook my head to clear my vision, and finally the stocky figure of Sawbones became discernible. He was standing in one of the unlighted openings, stretching out his powerful hand to me. I grasped it and was reassured by his strength as he drew me toward him.

"What's happening?" I gasped as he relieved me of the girl's burden.

"You were the victim of a hallucination," he explained. "I went through the same thing only worse. It almost had me convinced I had found an exit when I was actually about to step into a hole in the ground. But this form of architecture only seems to have fatal con-

sequences when seen through human eyes. At any rate, Ice Claw came right through, as sure-footed as a sleepwalker."

"But it was a little too hot for me," remarked the chretkor.

"I've broken into a pretty good sweat, myself," I confessed. I was thankful that Fratulon had taken the girl from me because I was also weighted down with the back pack full of our supplies.

"We'll try this route," said Fratulon, leading the way into a winding, tubular tunnel. A few paces inside we were surrounded by absolute darkness. "Since it isn't lighted it's probably never used by the Zagors. And it's unlikely we'll run into any Ooths in this part of the labyrinth. Do you agree, Atlan?"

"Only in principle."

"And what disturbs you about my suggestion?"

"The fact that it's a suggestion—not a decision," I answered.

It had become apparent to me in recent days that he often just turned over the responsibility for things to me. This was an honor, in fact, because it was a sign of his recognition of me as a man. But then on the other hand I had to ask myself what hidden purpose lay behind it all.

5/ THE MARAUTHANIAN RUINS

Gradually, Fratulon was being relieved of an old burden of danger.

Atlan had grown up in Tarkihl. Tarkihl was the palace of the Tatto, Armanck Declanter, and was also the single bastion of Arkonide civilization on this lawless world—even though the mighty structure had not been created by Arkonides. The original inhabitants had built it.

There Atlan had the advantage of contact with people of high influence as well as the highest officials of the government itself, and he learned how to get around in the society of noblemen. Initially, Fratulon had feared such exposure for his protege because on the one hand it was hard to foretell how Atlan might be received by the aristocratic Arkonides, whereas on the other hand one couldn't ignore the question of what Atlan's attitude would be toward them.

It was a high-staked gamble, and the outcome had often balanced on a razor's edge.

There was no way that Atlan could betray himself—or at least Fratulon believed this, because the youth knew nothing of his origin. But Orbanashol III had his secret agents everywhere, including Tarkihl, and it was always to be feared that they might become suspicious.

But now the most dangerous period had passed. Atlan was no longer dependent on anyone's protection, since he could stand on his own. He would be able to guard himself against the murderers who were searching the entire galaxy for him . . .

* * * *

We had covered a considerable distance in the labyrinths of Zagooth, and according to our compass we had moved in the general direction of the ruined city, but this place concealed so many secrets and mysterious places and effects that I couldn't fully trust the instrument. Fratulon seemed to share my feelings because he made no objection when I suggested that we should return to the surface at our first opportunity.

We stopped to rest. Fratulon had come upon another matter-projection curtain, behind which was a spherical cave that offered us ample room. While Sawbones looked to the wounds of the girl, Ice Claw scouted a way to the surface. In order not to go astray, he utilized a "cold-stick" to mark the way. This instrument left no trace that was optically noticeable, yet the marks could be easily followed by Ice Claw because of the cold they radiated.

The girl had regained consciousness, and after Fratulon had treated her she rapidly regained her strength, as well. She willingly answered our questions.

"What is your name?"

"Azhira."

"Azhira," I asked her, "how did you come to be in the labyrinths?"

"Vafron, that monster!" she cried hatefully. "He handed me over to the Zagors!"

"And who is Vafron?"

"He and 4 other men came in contact with us two days ago," she answered. "I hated him from the first moment I saw him, and the others didn't like him either."

I raised a hand to interrupt her, and I smiled. "Why don't you tell it to me in sequence? I'm also interested in knowing where all this took place, and to whom you belong."

She swept a strand of red hair from her brow and

smiled apologetically. "You'll have to excuse me if I don't make much sense. It's just that I'm still pretty mixed up and confused. What those lizard creatures did to me isn't easy to forget." She shuddered.

"You don't have to tell us anything if you're not up to it," I said.

She shook her head. "I have nothing to be silent about," she said, and then suddenly grasped my hand. "Will you take me back to my father?"

When I promised to do so, she told her story.

She and her father had joined a group of treasure hunters who had set up their camp in the Marauthanian ruins. There were still other groups who were constantly competing with each other. Not infrequently there were acts of violence and even bloody fights between these outfits.

I interrupted her again. "I'm familiar with the situation at the site of the ruins. You can boil it down to just the details concerning your own personal story."

She told us how Vafron and his 4 companions had shown up in the ruins two days before. After negotiating with the other camps in the area, these men came to make contact with her father. Vafron proposed an organization and merger of all treasure hunters who were camped in the ruins—naturally with him claiming the command position.

Azhira's father was more archaeologically inclined toward tracing the original inhabitants of Gortavor and was no soldier of fortune. After ascertaining that the other members of his party were not interested in any merger either, he had chased Vafron away.

But on the following day when her father was away from camp with a majority of the other men, Vafron made a forced raid on their little stronghold and stole her away. Then while they were en route to another ruin site they were attacked by Zagors. One of Vafron's

men could parley with the Zagors, and when it was learned they were demanding a human sacrifice victim, Vafron had handed Azhira over to them.

It was not an unusual tale. Incidents of this nature were more or less a daily part of life at the Marauthanian ruins. Of course it had been rather irresponsible of her father to take her along on the expedition, but I didn't say so out loud.

"Will you take me back there?" she asked.

"We're headed that way," I told her. "In Tarkihl we picked up a distress call which may have come from those ruins."

She clung suddenly to my arm. "I hope nothing's happened to my father!"

"You shouldn't jump right away to the worst conclusions," I said, hoping to reassure her.

"But Vafron . . . "

"Every other man in those ruins is another Vafron. It's not likely that the emergency call was connected with the incident you described. It's more probable that your father might have sent out a call for help because he's worried about *you*."

I could see she thought that probability to be even less plausible. Fortunately, however, I was saved from having to think up any further words of consolation. Ice Claw had returned.

"I've found a way out," he reported.

* * * *

We started to fear that Ice Claw wouldn't be able to find the exit he was talking about. At any rate he gave us a nervous time of it when he maintained that the air temperature had warmed up his cold marks so that he couldn't find the trail he had made.

"We'll never find our way out of here!" wailed Azhira.

As I saw her tremble in her fear I wondered how she expected to bear up under the rough life in the ruins. She didn't impress one as the kind of girl who would easily accustom herself to the raw life and customs of this wild planet. But she *was* beautiful, and maybe she thought that with her looks she could twist any tough tunnel-buster in the Spider Desert around her little finger.

"We're on the right course," declared Ice Claw as he led the way.

We turned off our flashlights and saw that the passage we were in opened upon a long chamber which was illuminated by a dim source of light. The ground was an inch thick with sand dust which must have been blown in here from the surface through an opening somewhere. It was now only a matter of moments before we would find the exit.

"Daylight!" cried Fratulon, pointing ahead.

Then I also made out the narrow ray of light that slanted steeply into the cavern. The opening in the ceiling was wide enough for two men to get through it at the same time. A sand drift reached from the floor practically to the hole. There was a fairly strong draft of air that caused the sand to swirl about and get into our noses and mouths.

Azhira coughed. I drew her to me instinctively to protect her, and she buried her face against my chest.

Fratulon gave the drift a light fanning with his energy beam so as to melt in a fairly resistive crust and hold the loose sand together. Otherwise we'd have just kept sinking back in the fine grit without ever getting to the opening.

"It wouldn't be at all wise to hike in the desert now," remarked Ice Claw.

"Why is that?" I asked, wonderingly. "The storm seems to have calmed down to where it's bearable."

"I'll grant you that, but up there it's still hot—in fact it'll be intolerable until the sun goes down."

Fratulon laughed and reached into his medical bag. He handed Ice Claw one of his "cold-sticks." "If you can't stand the heat, rub some of this into you."

Before we left the labyrinth, we all had a few swallows of water. When I reached the surface I saw the ruins at once. They towered beyond the web into an early twilight sky.

"We've made it!" I shouted in relief as I helped Azhira to climb through the opening. "The ruins are close at hand. We should be able to reach them before sundown!"

Azhira gazed through the openings in the silvery net overhead at the half-crumbled buildings, which were in the typical funnel-shaped design of the Arkonides. When she spoke, her lips trembled slightly. "They are very eerie looking from here. Those structures seem to be part of a ghost city, but they are inhabited by criminals of all kinds."

"If you have such a low opinion of treasure hunters," I asked, "why have you chosen their company?"

"I didn't want to leave my father alone," she answered gently. "He's so . . . vulnerable, so ignorant of the world. He needs someone to take care of him. Besides, how could I know that there were men who were capable of such low criminality?"

"That's all right, Azhira," said Fratulon as he glanced at me reprovingly. "Atlan didn't mean to lean on you."

I felt like asking him what I had said to her to suddenly make him so protective, but I refrained from doing so. When women were involved, one never knew where he stood with old Sawbones. I strode away swiftly, raising the dust behind me. I took no further

heed of Azhira. From here on, I thought, Fratulon could take charge of her.

Ice Claw caught up with me. "It's hot!" he groaned. He kept rubbing himself incessantly with the cold-stick. "I hope the Zagors don't track us here. I wouldn't be much good in a fight—not in this heat!"

"We are almost there," I said, trying to console him.

Fratulon remained a slight distance behind us and kept up a lively conversation with Azhira. I tried not to eavesdrop but couldn't help catching a few fragments that reached my ears. What I heard was enough to explain Fratulon's actions a little more clearly. I grinned secretly to myself. Old chubby Sawbones had taken a fancy to the girl, himself!

"I'm melting!" cried Ice Claw tormentedly.

"That comes from too much chatter," I retorted. "When your mouth flaps, you know, it loads up your bodily crystals with more heat energy."

"If that's supposed to be humor, Atlan, it's pretty flat," commented Ice Claw, somewhat surprised at my tone.

Suddenly, however, he stopped and placed a hand on my forearm. The coldness of his taloned grip was enough of a shock to bring me to an abrupt halt. I reached automatically for my weapon, but then I realized there was no need for it.

About 20 paces ahead of us was one of the rare tie-points of the spider web. Countless silvery strands converged here, forming a sort of platform where the bleached corpses of three humanoid creatures were to be seen. They were humans of Arkonide descent. Their once silvery hair was now shoulder long and dull gray, and it did not move in the wind.

I heard Azhira make an outcry behind me.

"Don't look at them," Fratulon told her.

"What do you make of them, Sawbones?" I asked. "It's fairly obvious they're victims of the Zagors."

"A sacrificial offering of the Zagors to their singing god of the silver web," said Fratulon with conviction. He frowned pensively as he shook his head. "I don't like that. Whenever the Zagors go on a warpath to get sacrifice victims for their gruesome rites, a discharge of forces from the *web* is imminent."

I nodded comprehendingly. Fratulon had told me often enough about the fact that there was an upsurge of vibrations and hypnotic humming in the silvery net from time to time, whenever the Zagors made an unusual number of human offerings to their god. It was suspected that the reptilian creatures had some way of sensing the approach of any rise in web activity.

I turned to the girl. "Do you know any of those men, Azhira?"

Sobbing in her revulsion, she pressed closer to Fratulon. "I can't look at them!" she exclaimed.

"It could be possible, though," said Fratulon, "that they are treasure hunters you might know. Just take a peek at them—you can stand that much, I'm sure."

Fearfully, Azhira lifted her head and barely opened her eyes to peer upward at the three bleached and mummified deadmen. She fixed her gaze upon them as one hypnotized, seemingly unable to turn away.

"Yes," she murmured softly. "I know them . . . at least one of them, anyway. He belonged to Lay Manos' outfit. He was an unscrupulous wretch and murderer . . ."

"Let's go on," urged Fratulon. As we moved forward he put his arm around the girl's shoulders.

It wasn't long before we reached the ruins. They consisted mainly of 8 funnel-shaped edifices, the largest of which was about 100 meters high. A predecessor of Armanck Declanter, the Tatto Marauthan,

had ordered them to be built here long ago in the hopes of founding an Arkonide colony. But the attempt to create another bulwark of Arkonide civilization had been shattered by the victorious power of the Spider Desert.

At present the cone-shaped structures were mostly deteriorated. But the signs of decay and destruction could not be attributed alone to the effects of wind and storm. The greatest amount of deterioration had been caused by the Zagors and the treasure hunters who persisted in haunting the place and dwelling in it. The endless battles for control or advantage had been waged with every means available. The scars of this warfare were visible everywhere.

And yet, life flourished in the ruins.

It was a miserable existence, continuously overshadowed by the imminence of death yet spurred on by the illusive dream of incalculable riches. The men and women who came into the Spider Desert usually had a poorly formed concept of what they were looking for. They didn't commit themselves to any fixed line of procedure. It was immaterial to them whether they stumbled upon treasures of a long-lost culture in the labyrinths of Zagooth or uncovered a mother lode vein of precious metal or discovered in the ruins the treasure chamber of the Tatto Marauthan, himself. They hoped for riches in any form.

But only the dreams of very few people were ever realized. Only a very small number of these adventurers ever returned—and fewer still came back with anything to show for it. For most of them, the desert itself became their fate.

Such were the Marauthanian ruins: a small oasis of stranded souls whose strivings led nowhere and whose longings remained unfulfilled.

The separate buildings were connected in many

places by structures fashioned of synthetic materials, and by suspension bridges. From some of the cross-supports hung smaller structures in the shape of baskets and crates which served as shelters for the treasure hunters. Other seekers of a hardier kind had used every variety of materials to erect veritable strongholds on the more inaccessible slopes or in the more defendable declivities of the ruins. In the course of time the most bizarre types of improvised structures had emerged out of the fallen masonry, like a growth of ulcers. Many of these fantastic looking places were stoutly defended and hotly contested.

At the moment, however, the ruined city looked dead and extinct. There was only a howling of wind to be heard among the looming walls of masonry, but no sign of life was to be seen.

Fratulon took in the ruins with a narrowed gaze. "Azhira," he asked, "where is the shelter or hiding place of your father's group?"

"We're on the highest level of that building that has only a part of its outer wall still standing," she replied, while indicating the direction with her hand.

The structure she had pointed out loomed 50 meters into the air like the skeleton of some prehistoric monster. Where one of the best preserved portions of the out-flaring main wall still remained, there on the highest level was a clumsy looking structure that appeared to consist of the most variegated kinds of materials.

"An easily defended stronghold," observed Fratulon. He furrowed his brow and added thoughtfully: "But the way that leads to it goes through other ruins where we would be easy targets for rival outfits."

I agreed with Sawbones. Of course we were a neutral party, but the fact that Azhira was with us could mislead her father's enemies and make them regard us as some new form of opposition.

I sighed. "We'll have to chance fighting our way through to Azhira's father. After that we can try to find out who sent the distress call."

"There is somebody!" exclaimed Ice Claw. He pointed to the base of the nearest ruin, which was hardly more than 100 paces from us.

A quasi-humanoid creature with green skin had appeared there and was beckoning to us with all four of his arms. I realized that it was one of the dwarf-like Manolians who was dressed in the single-piece hooded cloak of one of the desert dwellers.

When he ventured a few steps from the protection of the ruins, the desert in front of us suddenly came to life. In various places the sand showed movement, and Zagors emerged into view. They must have crept up to the ruined city under cover of night and then burrowed themselves into the sand so that they could lie here in wait for unsuspecting treasure hunters.

At sight of the reptiles, the Manolian turned to flee, but before he could duck between the protective walls behind him, a spear plunged into his back.

I caught a last glimpse of the green-skinned creature as he collapsed, but I was now forced to concentrate on the Zagors who faced us ready for a fight.

6/ IN THE PIRATES' LAIR

Impatiently, Fratulon looked forward to the day when his silence would be at an end.

Although he had believed that Atlan was not able to betray himself because of his ignorance of his parentage, there was one thing he had overlooked: namely, Atlan's childhood memories. They were dim and blurred and only seemed to occur feebly to him in his dreams. But also Atlan often had an association of ideas during conversations with certain aristocrats whose circle of activity revolved about Arkon and the Crystal Palace.

One day it turned out that some of these sporadic memory fragments almost proved fatal. Atlan related to a nobleman how he sometimes had certain mental impressions of Arkon and the Crystal Palace, although he had never been there before. The court sycophant and favorite of Orbanashol immediately became suspicious, but before he could transmit his information, Fratulon had managed to silence him.

Atlan was the only witness to the deed. He asked him why he had killed this man in whom he had a blind trust and to whom he had given his friendship. At the time, Fratulon had been very close to revealing the truth to the boy, but he again restrained himself.

Reason had won the battle, and now Fratulon anxiously awaited the day when he could break his long silence . . .

* * * *

In the next moment there were only six Zagors left out of eight. Fratulon had killed two of them, and immediately thereafter two more were credited to me. I felled them with a sustained jolt from my hand beamer. And then the rest of them were upon us.

I couldn't bring another shot to bear but I was able to dodge a Zagor who was making a thrust at me with his spear. The force of his charge carried him past me and I struck him on the back of the head with the barrel of my weapon. Although the blow didn't knock him out, it staggered him enough to slow his reactions down. I was after him so quickly that he didn't have time to even make a defensive movement before I clipped him across his throat with the edge of my hand. I heard his death rattle as he collapsed.

Only then was I able to look to my comrades, but it seemed they were no longer in need of my help. Fratulon stood there, legs apart, with Skarg poised ready in his hand. At his feet lay a bloodied Zagor. Another lay nearby in an unnatural position. Since he did not exhibit any visible wounds, I assumed that Ice Claw had taken care of him—just as he was taking care of the last one. As I looked at the chretkor he released the limp reptile from his deadly strangle hold.

Suddenly, Azhira let out a cry of warning.

I whirled about and sighted more Zagors emerging from the Spider Desert. "Get to those ruins!" I ordered, and I fired a few random beam shots at the new attackers before I took Azhira's hand and ran with her toward the nearest funnel-shaped building.

Just as I thought we had arrived at a point of safety, the girl cried out and staggered. I barely blocked her fall. As I gripped her upper arm, something wet and warm seeped through my fingers—blood!

"Azhira, you're wounded!" I exclaimed, somewhat

shaken by the fact, and I drew her in under the protection of the out-jutting masonry.

She stared in wide-eyed perplexity at her bloodied arm. Then her gaze turned to the green-skinned Manolian, who lay close by with a spear protruding from his back. He was still moving.

"Fratulon!" Sawbones and Ice Claw had just caught up to us. "See what you can do for that Manolian," I said.

The sturdy doctor-warrior grasped the 4-armed creature and drew him in under the protection of the wall.

In the meantime I had taken out my ray weapon again and turned toward our attackers, but the Zagors were already making a retreat. They must have realized that they couldn't take us by surprise, and apparently they also feared that other inhabitants of the ruins might come to our aid.

"It's alright now," I announced with relief. "We're safe . . . Ice Claw, keep an eye on the desert while I take care of Azhira's wound."

Fratulon had placed the Manolian on his side and was inspecting his back wound. However, the spear was so deep that it could not be extracted without wounding the creature more severely . . . As I met Fratulon's gaze, he shook his head slightly.

I examined Azhira's arm wound. "It isn't bad," I reassured her, and I slipped the back pack off my shoulders.

"I . . . I felt a terrible blow when that spear hit me. I thought it was going right through my arm," she said, somewhat weakly. Her face was abnormally pale.

"It's only a harmless flesh wound," I told her. "I'll bind it up and give you a sedative. After that you'll feel better, Azhira."

The Manolian opened his eyes and looked about him

with a glassy stare. "What . . . happened?" he asked in broken Arkonide. He moved his 4 arms and sought to touch his back.

"Be still," Fratulon ordered, pressing the other's arms back. "You need rest, friend."

"Who struck me down?" asked the Manolian faintly. A greenish spittle appeared at one corner of his mouth.

"The Zagors hit you before you could get to safety," answered Fratulon.

"Ah yes . . . the Zagors. I remember . . . "

I had fixed Azhira's arm wound and given her her sedative, so now I turned my attention to the Manolian. "We've driven back the Zagors," I said. "They are no longer a threat to us."

The Manolian made a wry face. "They are . . . a constant threat. They seek victims for their humming god."

As his glassy eyes turned to me, I nodded. "We saw three of Lay Manos' men who fell into their hands. Are you with the same outfit?"

The Manolian nodded weakly. "I am . . . Noy Manos . . . Lay's second-in-command. When he saw you he sent me out here to . . . to bring you to him. Are you . . . ?"

"We've come from Tarkihl in response to a distress call that must have come from this area," I answered.

"That is right," he said and then paused to carefully draw a deep breath. Three of his arms jerked forward gropingly. As the three hands found my right arm and closed around it, their grip was very feeble. "You have to get to Lay . . . he wants to talk to you . . . "

"Is he the one who sent out the distress signal?" I asked.

The Manolian released his grip on my arm and sought to support himself on his four hands. "I'll take

you to him . . . '' He collapsed, powerless to support himself.

''Was it Lay Manos who sent out that call?'' I repeated.

But there was no response from the Manolian.

''He's dead,'' Fratulon confirmed. He closed his eyes and jerked the spear out of his back.

''And we still don't know what's going on here,'' I said.

''You're right about that,'' replied Fratulon as he watched the desert with narrowed eyes. ''At any rate we know why the ruins look so dead and deserted. The inhabitants are afraid of the Zagors because they're on the warpath.''

I agreed. Normally the Zagors were content to just attack the caravans, but when the bloodlust came upon them and they were short of sacrificial victims they would form large war parties and even attack heavily defended strongholds and fortresses. At such times, one was not safe from them even in the Marauthanian ruins.

The only thing the Zagors feared then was the humming and vibrating of the silvery strands, because even they were not immune to the hypnotic emanations which were thus produced.

''I suggest we look up this Lay Manos character first of all and find out what he wants from us,'' I said. ''It's just possible he could have sent out that signal.''

''But what will become of my father in the meantime?'' objected Azhira, jumping to her feet. Since we gave her no answer, she made her own decision. ''If you won't go with me, I'll make it up there alone!''

''You'll do nothing of the kind, my pretty child.'' It was a voice that came suddenly from behind us.

I whirled and stared at the 4 bowmen who had stepped forth from among the fallen blocks of masonry.

Three of them were Arkonides and the 4th was a Manolian who held two drawn bows simultaneously. All arrows were aimed directly at us.

"Just don't move from the spot!" warned one of the Arkonides.

This one had the most unusual hair style I had ever seen. Long and silvery blond, it framed his face something like a helmet but fell in artistic patterns and waves over his shoulders, reaching to his chest and down his back. "We'll shoot if you make the slightest suspicious

Azhira cried out and ran away.

"Azhira!" exclaimed Fratulon, horrified. He was about to follow her but the 4-armed Manolian blocked his way with his doubly drawn bows. The 4 bowmen made no move to pursue Azhira, and I found out immediately the reason why.

High above us there was a deep-throated cawing sound as a mighty shadow plunged downward toward the ground. It was a giant bird of prey which spread out its wings over Azhira, grasped her in its claws, and lifted her into the air. Then it disappeared with her into a hole in the broken outer wall of the cone-shaped building.

The Arkonide with the unusual hair only grinned. "We will now disarm you and bring you to Lay Manos," he said. "If you value your lives, it would be advisable not to resist."

Fratulon grinned back. "You're only doing us a favor, since we were more or less on our way to see Lay Manos."

* * * *

The funnel-shaped structures were masterworks of Arkonide architecture. As a rule they were normally only accessible through entrances from below. The various rooms and living quarters were arranged in

terraces on the flanged inner side of the cone form, so that the middle of each structure was free for flowering plants which were arranged in a parklike splendor that was heavenly to behold.

But this pomp and magnificence was no more to be seen in the Marauthanian ruins. The built-in landscaping had deteriorated along with the buildings and the exotic plants had long since died out. Only a few of the hardier and more adaptive growths had managed to survive and send forth their tendrils and blooms among the fragments and debris on each level. As a result of changed environmental conditions, even some of them had developed mutated forms.

"My name is Ardelo." The Arkonide with the spectacular hairdo introduced himself as we climbed higher through access shafts and up half-crumbled stairs to the upper levels. "It might well be you'll be dealing with me in the near future."

"I hope you won't regret later that you made our acquaintance, Ardelo," said Fratulon. He gave him our names and the reason for our being here.

Ardelo only laughed. "Lay Manos will be glad to have a sawbones as his guest. When he finds out that you're responsible for the well-being of the Tatto of Gortavor, he'll be doubly impressed."

We came to the upper end of the stairs. I estimated that we must be 20 levels above the desert. Through a gap in the outer wall I could see the great web far below, sparkling in the last rays of the setting sun.

Ardelo stopped before an abyss-like hole that was some 20 paces wide and sank a few levels into the depths. On the other side of the pit was a wall that was overgrown with plants with large yellow leaves.

"Hey, are you asleep over there!?" Ardelo called across the intervening space. "Let's have the drawbridge!"

No sooner had he spoken than a part of the wall rattled out of the way, leaving an aperture about 6-feet wide. Shortly thereafter, a ramp supported by two iron chains spanned the abyss.

"Alright, get on over!" Ardelo commanded.

I was the first to walk onto the narrow bridge. Fratulon and Ice Claw followed me. On the other side we were received by 3 Manolians. The part of the building we entered had been really well preserved, even though none of the original furnishings were here anymore. On the walls there were still some fragments remaining of the self-illuminating material that had been used in various parts of the Zagooth labyrinths.

There was considerable disorganization here. Bales and boxes were stacked about in jumbled fashion among machinery parts, weapons, and food provisions. But immediately I noticed that the weapons consisted entirely of swords, lances, clubs and other primitive fighting implements. There was no sign of ray beamers or other modern weapons. Even Lay Manos' men carried only primitive types of weapons.

It caused me to fear that we'd have little chance of ever seeing our energy weapons again.

Ardelo went with his cohorts into some lateral passage and left us in the hands of the 3 Manolians. They escorted us into a large chamber, the floor of which was covered with furs topped by a scattering of colorful pillows in all shapes and sizes. Along one wall were a number of plundered articles of furniture that were an unaccustomed luxury for those who lived in the ruins.

Another wall was broken through in various places, offering a good view of the ruins below. About 180 to 200 feet beyond these improvised windows a slender wall fragment rose into the sky. On the highest pinnacle of this pillar was a fairly large platform where several of the giant birds of prey had built their nests. In that

moment I chanced to see one of them land there with a Zagor in its claws. The ensuing shrieks and cacklings sent a shudder through me and I turned away from the horrible spectacle.

Not far away in the middle of the chamber was a throne-like chair in which sat an unusually large Manolian. On the chair's tall backrest perched one of the dangerous, carnivorous birds of prey.

"I bid you welcome, noble sirs!" announced the green man in faultless Arkonide, and he swept his arms open in an extravagant gesture. "My vassals have reported to me that you come from Tarkihl. This is excellent, as it should prove advantageous to my plans. After all, Prontier would be more likely to deal with noblemen than with men of uncertain heritage."

Fratulon took several swift steps toward the Manolian, but he paused when the great bird on the chair fluttered its wings restlessly and opened its sharp beak. "I am Fratulon, personal physician of the Tatto, Armanck Declanter," said Sawbones, with a grave dignity. "Am I to deduce from your words that you only sent out a distress signal in order to entice me here and exploit my services for some dark purpose of your own?"

The Manolian reacted in some surprise. However, he recovered quickly, apparently pleased. "Well, so you're the Tatto's private medico, eh? Then I may expect you to be a man of reason rather than one who might get carried away by foolish impulses. Since you are a physician, all intelligent life is sacred to you. So I'm hoping you will do everything possible to save Azhira."

I moved to Fratulon's side, while keeping a wary eye on the fidgety bird beast. "You haven't answered Fratulon's question yet. Lay Manos, were you the one who sent out that distress call?"

The green-skinned Manolian's face reflected a mixture of surprise and anger. "What are you talking about? What distress call? I don't even have a transceiver. And why should I send for help? I can take care of myself in any situation."

"If that is true, then you don't need us," I retorted. "Let us go so that we can help the ones who sent the call."

"That is enough!" shouted Manos angrily.

The bird beast shot from the chair as though by command and sailed toward me on its giant wings. Before it could rake me with its talons, I was just able to drop to the floor out of its range. By the time I got to my feet again, the bird was already back in its place on top of the throne.

"That was merely a warning. The next time I send Ayff at you, your quickness will not do you any good. Who are you to put on airs with me, anyway?"

"I am Atlan, assistant to Fratulon," I answered.

Lay Manos pointed to the chretkor and asked: "Who are you?"

"Ice Claw."

Manos nodded. "A fitting name. You look like a wandering iceberg that's gone astray in the desert." He smacked the arms of his chair with two of his 4 hands. "I can see I'm going to have to speak plainly to you. Basically it's immaterial where you hail from or what you want here. It's even possible that you don't know anything about Azhira and her father. But fate has thrown you together with the girl so that you are responsible for her."

"Lay Manos, you are unable to force us . . ." Fratulon began.

But the Manolian interrupted him with a multihanded gesture of impatience. "Get off your high horse, sawbones—this isn't Tarkihl! I know that you'll

do anything you can to spare the girl's life. If you will do what I ask you will be a free man and can do your duty as you see fit. But before you help the ones who sent out the distress call, you must perform a service for me."

"What do you want of us, Manos?" asked Fratulon.

The Manolian sighed in evident relief. "At last you're talking like a sensible man. I want you to find Prontier and tell him that his daughter, Azhira, is my prisoner. He can get her back as soon as he relinquishes to me the treasures that he brought up out of Zagooth. If he refuses, his daughter must die."

"And why do you choose us to be your mediators?" Fratulon wanted to know. "Why don't you send one of your own people?"

"That was my original intention," answered the Manolian, "but I've decided that none of my men are sufficiently fluent to be able to handle this negotiation with Prontier. You are much more suitable for that. And you should be glad I'm entrusting this assignment to you. I could just as easily have had you executed."

"I'll grant you that," admitted Fratulon. "But don't expect too much from us. We can't force Azhira's father to agree to the exchange."

"He'll meet my conditions," said Manos, with conviction. "That is, if he wants his daughter back in one piece. You don't have to do anything more than to be factual with Prontier and come to terms with him as to what will be in store for his daughter if he doesn't hand over that Zagooth treasure. So that you may appreciate the confidence I have in your art of persuasion, I will permit your two friends to accompany you."

Fratulon persisted with a further inquiry: "Are you expecting one of us to come back with Prontier's answer?"

The other shook his head. "Once you've completed

your mission, you are free. I'll send Ardelo along with you, and he'll bring back Prontier's message to me. You have just one hour to change the old fool's mind. If Ardelo isn't back here by then, Azhira will die."

"One hour!" protested Fratulon. "It may take us at least that long to fight our way through to Prontier's hiding place!"

The Manolian laughed. "You will go there by air, of course!" he announced.

I shuddered when I heard a cakling and cawing and beating of wings coming from the direction of the improvised windows. Four of the giant birds had just entered there and were settling to the floor of the hall.

"You will be as swift as the wind, and what's more, you won't have to fight it out with the other treasure hunters or the Zagors, either. On that basis also, there's no reason for returning your energy weapons to you. I'll keep them as a present to me."

Fratulon clenched his fists angrily. "Manos, if you put us out in the ruins without weapons, you know we're done for. At least give me back my sword and furnish my friends with swords also. If we face Prontier without weapons, we'll be dealing from a weaker position, right from the start!"

Lay Manos considered this briefly. Then he yielded to Fratulon's request and added: "Alright, sawbones, I'll let you have your equipment back. And if you'll take a piece of advice from me, I suggest you look up Komyal's outfit when you're through with Prontier. The Voolynesian has some radio equipment and is probably the one who sent out the distress call. A bad epidemic of some kind has broken out among his people—maybe a plague . . . "

"A plague!" echoed Fratulon incredulously.

"Yes, a plague," confirmed Manos. "After you've taken care of my little chore you'd better go take care of

the Voolynesians. Ever since this morning when word of the epidemic got out, none of the inhabitants of these ruins has dared to come out of hiding. We'd all be obliged to you, sawbones, if you were able to keep this thing from spreading."

"Thanks for the information," muttered Fratulon, suppressing his rage.

Ardelo came into the throneroom and handed over Skarg and the first-aid kit to Fratulon. He also issued one sword apiece to me and Ice Claw. I noted that he had thrust my hand beamer into his belt.

"I wish you a happy flight and lots of success!" Manos called after us as we entrusted ourselves to the heavy talons of the mighty birds.

7/ THE TREASURE BARTER

Until now, no one had seen the real Fratulon.

There was a certain amount of personal gratification in playing the mystery figure. His was the role of the bon vivant who never failed to give an appraising eye to passing fair ladies, or the general epicurean and gourmet to whom food and drink were a part of his life style. These roles came easily to him because in certain respects they suited his character. And yet the personality he displayed to the aristocrats in Tarkihl was only a facade.

There was still no one on Gortavor who had come to know the real Fratulon, not even Atlan, although in the latter's company he often lifted his mask—to a point. It was just enough so that Atlan could not fully perceive his real identity.

Because Atlan could only know who his teacher was and what goals he had set for himself when the youth had withstood his final test . . .

* * * *

Although I was fond of flying, it was not quite to my taste to be in the clutches of a giant bird of prey, high over the desert—much less so to be an easy target for every enemy lying in ambush below among the ruins.

But fortunately there were no untoward incidents. It was nevertheless a relief to leave Lay Manos' roost far behind us and to come within sight of the gaunt ruin that was our goal. Here on the outer flank of the skeletal building remains, the bizarre structure of Prontier's shelter hung suspended.

We were almost at our destination when I noticed for

the first time that we were being followed at some distance by a fifth bird of prey. Now it suddenly caught up and flew past us, circling close over Prontier's stronghold. I recognized the figure that the creature held suspended in its claws. It was Azhira!

"Father!" she cried out despairingly.

What was Lay Manos' purpose in this maneuver?

An opening appeared in the strange construction atop the towering wall. A humanoid figure showed itself, but I could only make out the upper portion of it. I caught sight of wavy, long white hair framing a very ancient-looking face.

"Azhira!"

The bird carrying Ardelo flew so close to the aperture that the white-haired one drew back in startled surprise. In the next moment the barrel of a ray weapon loomed in the opening.

"Don't be stupid, Prontier!" yelled Ardelo. "If you open fire on us you won't see your daughter again—at least not alive!"

"Then what do you devils want from me!?"

"We've come to work out a price with you for your daughter," shouted Ardelo. "Lay Manos sent us. Let us land first so we can go into the details!"

The opening banged shut with a loud slamming sound, but before us was a porchlike platform. The ray weapon had disappeared.

First, Ardelo was set down by his bird beast—then Ice Claw and Fratulon and myself in succession, until all of us felt a firm support under our feet. I breathed a big sigh of relief.

"You take it from here, Sawbones," said Ardelo. "But just don't forget the girl's life is at stake. Don't try any tricks. In one hour, Lay Manos will send a bird after me to bring me back, and he expects to get a positive decision."

"I'll keep it in mind," Fratulon promised, glumly.

In front of us an armor-plated door swung upward, revealing an Arkonide. He was armed with a dagger and wore his unkempt hair tied behind his head in a knot. Behind him appeared two more men in an equally disheveled condition.

"You men are armed," said the man with the hair knot. "You'd better leave those weapons at the entrance."

Fratulon shook his head. "We come in peace, but we will not humble ourselves before you. Prontier will have to trust us if he's interested in seeing his daughter again. We're keeping our weapons."

I could see uncertainty in the Arkonide's face. Probably Prontier had told him to be sure to disarm us before leading us to him, but since the facts didn't fit his instructions the sentinel didn't know what he should do. The decision was made for him by Prontier himself.

His voice came to us from inside the stronghold. "Let them in, Waccor. I'll receive just two of them, but no firearms! You keep an eye on the other two in the meantime!"

The man called Waccor made way for us. As we passed him he singled out Fratulon and myself. "You, Fatso, and you, little friend—you get to see the Professor. And you two . . . " He pointed to Ardelo and Ice Claw . . . " . . . are going to keep me company."

We entered the improvised fortress, which appeared no less bizarre on the inside than it had from the exterior. The entire structure was supported by an assortment of metal and plastic beams which were cross-braced by other supporting members. From this network of girders a number of compartments had been suspended, which served the inhabitants as living quarters and storage rooms. The largest of these compart-

ments loomed above us, composed of sturdy sheets of armor plate. A hatch opened in its floor and a rope ladder dropped down.

"I demand to be present at the negotiations," announced Ardelo as he determinedly gripped his weapon.

Fratulon grinned and shook his head. "Your boss told me to handle this deal, remember? So I can also choose my partner in this. You heard the Professor's conditions—no firearms. It's better that you remain here, Ardelo. Ice Claw will keep you company."

Ardelo stiffened visibly at this. His face darkened under its fixed shroud of hair. I thought he was about to lose control and draw his weapon, but then he thought better of it and complied with Fratulon's instruction.

"That's better, Ardelo," said Fratulon. "Manos will be pleased with you."

I was the first to climb the rope ladder. When I came up through the trapdoor, the barrel of a heavy raygun was thrust under my nose.

"Take it easy, Professor," I advised him. "Lay Manos sent us here to palaver with you—nothing more."

I remained near the trapdoor with my hand fairly close to the hilt of my sword as I regarded the person facing me. Prontier was tall and slender but appeared smaller than he actually was because of his stooped posture. His long, narrow cranium was almost entirely obscured by the wild confusion of his long white hair. Beneath a high forehead sparkled a pair of dark eyes which alternately watched me and then Fratulon as he grunted his way through the narrow hatchway and joined us. His wrinkled face gave him an ancient appearance, but this impression was counteracted by the alert life energy that burned in his eyes.

"You can put your weapon away, Professor," said Fratulon. "You have nothing to fear from us. We do not belong to Lay Manos' outfit. He has forced us to be go-betweens for him. We had to accede to his demands so as not to endanger your daughter's life."

Prontier inspected us searchingly. "Actually, you don't look much like criminals," he said, finally. "Who are you, and what have you to do with that Manolian?"

Fratulon briefly told him our story. It boiled down to the fact that we had come from Tarkihl in response to a distress call, we had saved Azhira from the clutches of the Zagors, and then had fallen into the hands of Lay Manos and his men.

"I'm inclined to believe your story," said Prontier, but he still trained his weapon on us. "The only thing I don't understand is why Manos chose you, his prisoners, to carry out this mission. He must realize that you wouldn't voluntarily go back to him."

"Manos has given us our freedom," I interjected. "But he's sure that Fratulon, as physician to the Tatto of Gortavor, will not gamble with your daughter's life. The real reason Manos let us go is that he fears the epidemic that's supposed to have broken out in Komyal's camp. It's to his own interest that we prevent the plague from spreading.

"I've heard about the plague," said Prontier. He gave us another testy look, then made a decision to dispense with the weapon. "I believe you. I don't see any reason why you should try to deceive me. So what is the message you are supposed to give me from Lay Manos? What is he asking in return for Azhira?"

Fratulon stated the condition succinctly: "He wants the treasure you brought up out of Zagooth."

Prontier's eyes widened in astonishment. "What treasure?"

Fratulon and I exchanged quick glances. Prontier's surprise appeared to be genuine.

"I haven't the slightest idea what treasure he's talking about," said Fratulon, "but I gathered the impression that Manos was sure of it. He seemed to have information that you have found something of value, and that's what he wants—in exchange for Azhira. If you do not fulfill his requirement he will kill the girl. That is no idle threat, Prontier. I'm convinced he means business."

"So he knows that I've found something in the labyrinths that I attach a value to," muttered the Professor, more or less to himself. "Where did he get this information? It could be that one of my men has mentioned it to some of the other treasure hunters. I might have known that they were not trustworthy. I hired them at the Gortavor spaceport although I realized that they were only adventurers and fortune hunters. But you can't scare up a better type of men . . . "

"It's no use trying to figure out who could have told Manos about your valuable discovery," said Fratulon. "He's got your daughter. He'll only set her free in exchange for the treasure."

Prontier slowly shook his head while a bitter smile touched his lips. "Lay Manos could not have found out what my find pertains to because I've not discussed it with anyone," he said. He shrugged his shoulders resignedly. Then he looked at us again and added: "The Manolian will not set Azhira free, even if I give him all my treasures."

"You leave that to us, Professor," I answered swiftly. "We'll see to it that he keeps his part of the bargain."

Prontier did not seem much convinced by my words. Again he shook his head. "Manos will be disappointed if I turn these treasures over to him—because to him

they are completely worthless. They are only cultural artefacts of the original people of Gortavor which only have a hypothetical value. See for yourselves."

Prontier turned to the rear section of the room. As he turned his back to us I heard a series of strange noises through the trapdoor. I went over to the opening and looked below.

I saw Ice Claw struggling with Ardelo. The chretkor sought to grasp Ardelo with his claws, but the Arkonide was much too nimble for him. He seemed to know what uncanny power lay in Ice Claw's hands. He struck the chretkor over the head with the butt of his weapon.

Ice Claw succeeded in grasping Ardelo's neck with both hands, and he closed his grip. I was about to breathe easy again when I noticed that this seemed to have no effect on Ardelo whatsoever. Which led me to suspect that his special hairdo was insulating him from Ice Claw's deadly forces.

The Arkonide broke free of the grip and struck Ice Claw down with a vicious blow. I was in the act of ducking out of sight when Ardelo discovered me and aimed his beamer at me.

"Don't move, Atlan," he warned me, "or your career as a junior sawbones will be cut real short!"

"You must have lost your mind," I blurted out at him. "If Manos finds out how you've interrupted our dealings, he'll let his birds have you for supper!"

Ardelo laughed. "They've gotten used to Zagors. Besides, I don't give a hoot about Lay Manos. I'm going to have that treasure for myself. Now move! Tell the Professor to hand it over or I'll broil all of you alive up there! And don't let him get any smart ideas. His loyal servant, Waccor, has told me what the jewel box looks like where the treasure is kept."

So Waccor had turned traitor, I thought, and here Ardelo was also going behind Manos' back who

thought he could trust him. It was grotesque and somewhat ironical that all of them were after a treasure that wasn't worth a thing to them. I might have found it all amusing if Azhira's life hadn't been at stake in the matter.

"I won't wait much longer, Prontier!" shouted Ardelo.

Without moving from my place, I said: "Give him the treasure, Professor."

"But then what happens to Azhira!?"

"Didn't you say, yourself, that Lay Manos probably wouldn't go for the trade?" I reminded him. "If Ardelo thinks the treasure will make him happy, then give it to him."

"Atlan is right," I heard Fratulon say behind me. "It makes no sense for us to sacrifice ourselves over that jewel box. We'll manage to find another way to set Azhira free."

Even as Fratulon spoke I was aware of small noises behind me that sounded like the opening and closing of a container, and I knew that Sawbones had caught my secret signal and followed through.

Right after that, Prontier moved into my field of vision, carrying the jewel case. It was about the length of a forearm, half as wide, and a handbreadth deep. I took it out of Prontier's hand and handed it down to Ardelo, who received it without lowering his weapon.

"It feels pretty light," he said suspiciously as he weighed the box in his hand.

"It's an old superstition that the worth of something has to match its weight," I said.

"Just the same I'm going to see if this thing is also slightly empty or not," insisted Ardelo, drawing back toward the armor-plated door. He reached behind him, pulled back the bolt, and shoved the door open.

Only then did he open the cover of the box.

His eyes widened in horror as a greenish cloud of gas poured out of it. He cried out. The weapon fell from his hand. He clutched at his throat, gasping for breath. He staggered outside where he stumbled and fell across the platform. I watched him as he went over the edge, still clutching the chest to him, and fell away into the depths below.

"Now all my work and research has been for nothing," commented Prontier gloomily. "And there's no possibility of saving Azhira."

* * * *

"I couldn't imagine that Ardelo would go over the edge with the box," said Fratulon remorsefully. "That vial I placed in the chest only contained some knock-out gas. Anyway, you don't have to give up yet, Professor. We'll just climb down and fetch your treasure back."

Prontier waved off the suggestion with a deprecating gesture. "That isn't what I meant at all when I said that my researches have been in vain. It doesn't even make any difference to me whether I retrieve those archaelogical artefacts or not. If I lose Azhira, nothing else would make any sense or have any value to me. Lay Manos won't believe me when I tell him I have no articles of value with which to pay the ransom for Azhira's release. He will assume that I am not interested in making such an exchange, and he will kill her."

"We'll find a way to outsmart that Manolian," I declared, although at the moment I didn't see any way out. "We don't have to advertise the fact that what he wants doesn't actually exist, you know."

"Atlan has a point there," agreed Fratulon. "We could pretend to be agreeable with his terms for the exchange, but first we have to gain some time so that we can work out a plan."

Meanwhile, we had all come down the ladder to the lower floor level near the door. It was at this moment that Ice Claw recovered from the blow he had received from Ardelo. Having overheard some of our conversation, he proceeded to give us some added information.

"While you were negotiating with the Professor," he said, "Waccor and the other two men with him went out of here somewhere. He made an excuse to them that the traps had to be checked that protect the approaches to this place, but it looked to me as though he and Ardelo had something cooking between them. At first it seemed ridiculous to think that the two of them could be working together in secret, but I kept an eye on them just the same. So it didn't come as a complete surprise to me when Ardelo made his attack."

He stared at his hands perplexedly. "But I still don't understand why my forces had no effect on him."

I explained it to him: "I saw you at the time, Ice Claw. It was that crazy hairdo of his—it worked like an insulator against those iceberg hands of yours."

Fratulon spoke up: "There's no doubt about it—Waccor and Ardelo have made a deal between them for dividing up the booty. And if Waccor doesn't find any loot with Ardelo's corpse he'll assume that it's still up here in the stronghold. Presumably he'll get some cronies together in an attempt to storm this place."

"Jet let him try it," commented Prontier grimly. "I'll give those crooks a hot reception. I have an energy weapon against their spears and bows and arrows. Besides, there is a series of traps he'll have to deactivate before he can get here."

"Nevertheless, Professor, you aren't going to be safe here any longer," put in Fratulon.

"Nor *was* I," retorted Prontier. "I had imagined myself to be safe because I trusted my men. I noticed some of their duplicity for the first time when I was in

Zagooth. They left me behind, probably in the hopes that I would become lost in the labyrinths, but I found my way out. They protested their innocence in the matter but I didn't believe them. When we returned here to the shelter I found that Waccor had been tied up and the others killed. Waccor told me that Vafron had forced his way in and stolen Azhira. Now I'm just about convinced that Waccor *let* Vafron come into the fort."

"Wouldn't it be possible," I said, "that Waccor might get together with Vafron again? If Vafron made it once into your fortress he ought to be able to do it a second time. You have to get out of here, Professor, before Waccor gets reinforcements and lays a siege on this place."

"Let them come," he answered, crestfallen. "If I can't hold out here I have a means of escape that even Waccor doesn't know about. But why should I run away at all? I don't have anything more to lose. Let Vafron have his little triumph."

"If there's an escape route, so much the better," I said. "You can leave your base together with us and be undetected. That way, the others will think we're still here. And while they're storming this place we can be trying to rescue Azhira."

"How will you accomplish that?" asked Prontier, gesturing in a sign of resignation. "I don't have anything I can use that Manos would consider to be a fair exchange for Azhira."

As I was about to answer him I heard a persistent cawing sound outside.

Ice Claw exclaimed: "That's Lay Manos' bird beast—the one that's supposed to bring Ardelo back!"

Prontier cried out in despair, turning to Fratulon. "If the bird doesn't bring Ardelo back, Manos will kil! my daughter! Can you deny that?" He was shaking Fratulon's shoulders by now. "What can we possibly

do? Ardelo is dead! That bird will fly back alone and . . . ''

''No,'' I interposed, decisively. ''I'm going back in Ardelo's place.''

''That would be suicide, Atlan,'' Sawbones retorted. ''Manos would suspect a trap and he'd feed you to his carrion monsters.''

''Not if he swallows the bait I'm going to dangle in front of him,'' I answered. ''I'm going to tell him factually that Ardelo is double dealing him, and I'll also let him know we don't trust him, so that's why I've come to him with empty hands. He'll have to accept that when I propose we select a neutral meeting place where Azhira can be exchanged for the treasure. What place would you suggest as a meeting point, Professor? It should be easy for Lay Manos to get to, and it should be one that's familiar to other groups of treasure hunters. I'll tell him that we'll meet there at dawn to hand over the ransom. Actually, the rest of you will have to win over some other camp of men to our side in order to play them against Lay Manos at the right moment. If some of the others smell a treasure they'll be ready to fight, so while the thieves are all busy bashing each other's heads in you can be trying to free Azhira and me.''

''That sounds easier than it will be to actually accomplish,'' cautioned Prontier.

''Nevertheless it's a good idea,'' Fratulon argued, and he added: ''At any rate it's the only way we can gain more time. The only thing I don't like is that you're offering yourself as a hostage to Lay Manos, Atlan. I . . . ''

Ice Claw interrupted him impatiently. ''We can't wait any longer or that bird's going to fly back alone. So what meeting point are you suggesting, Professor?''

Prontier hesitated and then said: "Marauthan's main reception hall would be as suitable as any other place."

"Marauthan's main hall it is!" exclaimed Ice Claw, and before anybody could stop him he dashed outside onto the platform.

"Ice Claw!" I shouted after him, and I was about to chase him when I came to a sudden stop in the open doorway.

The great carrion bird shot down at that instant, grasped the chretkor about the shoulders with its talons, and flew away with him.

"See you at dawn!" yelled Ice Claw. Then the bird beast disappeared with him among the night-shadowed crumbling towers.

I turned back into Prontier's shelter, scolding aloud to myself. "That crazy chretkor—you never know when he's going to try something on his own! One of these days, that stubborn, animated anatomy chart . . . "

Fratulon tried to console me, clapping me on the shoulder. "There's an advantage in Ice Claw's going instead of you," he said. "When we contact Komyal's outfit I'll need you as my assistant. Ice Claw wouldn't be able to help me combat the epidemic."

Prontier was incredulous. "Do you mean to say you're actually going to try to penetrate the stronghold of the Voolynesians? But what will happen to Azhira then?"

"We've come out into the Spider Desert to bring medical help to some treasure hunters who are in an emergency situation," Fratulon explained. "Whatever happens, these people need our help and I'm not going to leave them in the lurch, Professor. But we'll also try to help Azhira. Maybe it's even possible to combine the two efforts in one. Now show us that secret exit of yours so that we can get out of here."

Prontier shrugged dejectedly and led us into the rear part of the hideout. Between several bales of material he showed us a square declivity in the floor. The bottom of the inset area seemed to be composed of the same armor-plate type material as the rest of the floor, but Prontier explained it to us.

"This is not solid matter, but a projection of something that is deceptively similar. The generation of this matter projection is one of the secrets I was able to salvage out of my expedition into Zagooth."

"We're familiar with this phenomenon," said Fratulon. "So what is underneath here?"

"There's a shaft that leads almost in a straight descent through the outer wall to the base of the whole cone-shaped structure," answered Prontier.

"Then there's nothing left but to climb down through it," Fratulon concluded.

8/ THE DREADED TRAP

Fratulon had his own background of explorations and hidden discoveries.

During his 13 years on Gortavor he had made countless trips into unknown regions, and therefore he knew the planet like no one else. He was as much at home in the eternal snow fields and ice floes of the polar regions as he was in the steaming jungles of the equator. During his travels he had unraveled countless mysteries pertaining to the original inhabitants and had learned to use them to his advantage.

However, all those lonely excursions into the wildernesses of Gortavor were not motivated by a lust for adventure, as he pretended to others. Rather, they had been for the sole purpose of making preparations in case that Atlan's pursuers picked up his trail.

However safe he and Atlan might appear to be in Tarkihl, he nevertheless had to be ready for the day when someone would come and tear the mask from his face.

Fratulon was prepared for this. On Gortavor there were a thousand hiding places where he and Atlan could find refuge.

But the Marauthanian ruins did not happen to be one of them . . .

* * * *

The shaft appeared to be endless. It plunged down along the flanged outer wall into the depths, apparently having served once as a ventilation channel. At even intervals, fist-sized holes had been made through which one could get a good view of the outside, but they also

served handily as handholds and toeholds. No one knew why Marauthan had created this ventilating system, and I myself had never heard of this kind of arrangement in one of the conical structures. It was probably a good guess that Marauthan's architect had sought to obtain quality of air-conditioning for the living quarters of the building, by utilizing the increased draft that was created by this means.

Such were my thoughts during our descent.

Prontier had led the way, followed by Fratulon, and I brought up the rear. Prontier was armed with his energy weapon and I had also retrieved my hand beamer that Ardelo had appropriated from me, since he had dropped it during his precipitate reaction to the anesthetizing gas. Fratulon contented himself with his beloved Skarg. I had taken over his instrument case from him inasmuch as he had enough difficulty in negotiating the narrow shaft without it.

Finally I felt ground under my feet. Here the darkness was more complete than it had been inside the shaft. I groped along the wall until I came to a place that was dimly illuminated by starlight. Between several outcroppings of the ruins ahead of me I saw two phantom-like figures rise up. In my reaction I bumped into somebody, and a hand was clapped over my mouth.

"Zagors!" whispered Fratulon close to my ear.

Involuntarily I pulled out the beamer. Fratulon released his hand from my mouth and I crept closer to a low wall in front of me in order to have a clear view of the field of ruins before us.

At first all I could discern was the heaps of rubble and the remains of fallen walls, but then I caught a movement there. A Zagor moved soundlessly in the shadow of a wall, and two others crept along on the other side of it. They were moving toward some objective which lay

in a direction away from our hiding place. We found ourselves directly behind them.

As Fratulon turned toward me I caught a winking reflection of Skarg in his hand, and he signaled me to put away the ray weapon. I placed it in my belt and drew the sword that Lay Manos had furnished me.

Suddenly I heard a sound that could not have been made by the Zagors. It was more like the furtive scraping of soled feet. Then the figure of a man appeared behind one of the walls. He carried a spear, and in his hand was a curved sword.

In that moment he discovered the three Zagors and cried out in alarm as they charged upon him. It was also the signal for us to make our attack. Fratulon flew toward the four fighting figures with arms widespread for battle and there was a tangle and blur of bodies before me as I arrived. I ripped open the leg of a Zagor and knocked him out with the flat of my sword, but before I could pick out another opponent the fight was ended.

Fratulon had taken care of the other two Zagors with his bare fists. Now he dragged the man out from under the two unconscious reptiles by the collar of his cloak.

"Just take a look, Atlan—see what we've found here!" said Fratulon in feigned surprise. "What a coincidence, to run into an old acquaintance!"

"Waccor!" I exclaimed in my astonishment.

Prontier left his concealment and joined us. When he heard Waccor's name he cried out, "Traitor!" He was about to attack him and I had to pull him back forcefully.

Waccor gasped his relief at sight of us. "What luck that you showed up just now! Otherwise those beasts would have done to me the same as they did the other two."

"That would have been no loss in your case, you traitor!" cried Prontier, beside himself with rage.

"Keep your voice down, Professor," Fratulon admonished him. "Who knows how many Zagors may be running around loose?"

"There aren't any more of them here in the ruins," Waccor said. "But outside of here it's swarming with them. During daylight they've been digging into the sand and now they're all coming out of their hiding places."

"You were probably too yellow to risk yourself going through the desert, weren't you?" said Fratulon scornfully. "Or are you still waiting around for that bosom buddy of yours, Ardelo?"

Waccor shook his head. "I saw him take that fall from the hideout," he said, with a shaky voice. "You really took him in with that jewel box. It's his tough luck that he let himself be fooled by it. What difference does it make to me?" He shrugged. "I'm not that anxious to have the treasure."

"Oh yes?" Fratulon queried sarcastically. "So why are you still wandering around down here in this area? Would you by any chance be trying to figure how you can crack that stronghold?"

Waccor's answering laugh sounded somewhat hollow. "It was stupid of me to get mixed up with Ardelo, but I also realized that I could never go back to Prontier. So I was figuring what other outfit I could join up with. Since I wouldn't be too welcome with Lay Manos, either, the only other choice seemed to be Komyal. I've always had good relationship with the Voolynesians."

"Aha!" Fratulon grunted knowingly. "So you wanted to win over the Voolynesians to the idea of helping you get the treasure from the Professor!"

"What are you talking about, Sawbones?" retorted

Waccor, irritated. "I only wanted to join up with them, that's all. The treasure had nothing to do with it because I've forgotten about it."

"So? Then it looks as though you didn't make it with Komyal's group, and that's why you're back snooping around here."

Again, Waccor shook his head. "Komyal accepted me with open arms. He needs every sound man he can get, because some of his men are stricken by the plague. When I told him that you and your assistant were with Prontier, he sent me out right away to contact you. He says he sent out a distress call and that he needs your help, Sawbones! I was just now on my way to you with my two companions when the Zagors attacked us."

"So Komyal was the one who sent out the call." Fratulon seemed to deliberate on this. He looked Waccor straight in the eye when he asked: "Are you prepared to lead us to him?"

"That's why I'm here," Waccor answered eagerly. "I'll take you there. There's even a bridge near here that leads to the ruins where Komyal is camped, so we can avoid the desert sands. I've no stomach for running into any more Zagors tonight. In fact it's advisable for us to get out of this area."

Fratulon was still hesitant. "Waccor, you're a born schemer," he said, cautiously. "Maybe you've missed your calling—you might have gone far in the court of Orbanashol III. You betrayed Prontier to Lay Manos and then went behind Manos' back in your dealings with Ardelo, but now you're offering your dubious loyalty to Komyal. How many masters do you actually still serve?"

Waccor was surprisingly frank: "Basically, I'm working for number one—*me* . . ."

"How is it you did not turn to Vafron, since you gave him a tip or two in the past?" persisted Fratulon.

And once again Waccor was amazingly frank: "Vafron has joined forces with Komyal, Sawbones—or didn't you know that?"

* * * *

Waccor climbed up through the ruins with an incredible agility. We were hard pressed to keep up with him—especially the Professor, who was not accustomed to such physical exertion. He kept stopping to rest and catch his breath, so the rest of us were also forced to take a breather.

"Hurry!" Waccor urged us. "Every minute can be a matter of life and death. If Komyal's men don't get help pretty soon, this plague is going to wipe them out!"

Our way led almost entirely over fragmented outcroppings of masonry and through crumbling levels of the former main structure, some of which threatened to crash into further ruins at any time. We were still in the same building remains where the solitary pinnacle stood that supported Prontier's stronghold, but we were now on the opposite side.

When we reached the highest elevation in this particular area we came upon a suspension bridge that spanned a 100 meter gap to the next structural remains of a principal building. At its lowest arc the bridge almost reached down to the silvery strands of the web, which at this place extended itself between the two former cone-shaped structures.

"Komyal's fort is over there," said Waccor. "We're almost there. We have to go real easy when we're on the bridge. It mustn't start swinging and it can't be loaded too heavily, otherwise it will touch the net below. The best way is to spread out with plenty of

distance between us so we can distribute the weight better."

Prontier came panting up to the platform that the bridge was anchored to. I had followed close behind him during the climb in order to help him. He turned to gaze upward for the last time toward his stronghold, which was clearly visible from our location and stood silhouetted darkly against the starry heavens.

Waccor grinned at him. "Aren't you afraid that during your absence somebody is going to steal your treasure, Professor?"

As Prontier maintained a stubborn silence, Fratulon answered for him: "In his own mind the Professor gave up that fort a long time ago—ever since he realized he couldn't trust his men. You can rest assured Waccor, that the treasure has been moved to safety."

I caught a gleam in Waccor's eyes, but he refrained from asking any further questions on the subject. In the long run he wanted to give the impression that he had no further interest in the alleged treasure.

"Wait till I give you the signal, Fratulon," he said as he stepped out onto the bridge. "Then follow me."

When he had gotten far enough away, the Professor spoke to us in low tones. "Do you think you should reveal to him the meeting place we've indicated to Lay Manos?"

"Leave that decision to me, Professor," Fratulon answered softly.

"You can move out now, Sawbones!" called Waccor. He was at a distance of about 15 meters from us, out on the bridge. "The rest of you follow at the same distance from each other."

Fratulon moved cautiously onto the bridge, which had already begun a gentle swaying motion. He tripped slightly on a loose plastic plate underfoot but was able to catch himself on the handrail rope.

"Hey!" yelled Waccor anxiously. "You'd better pay closer attention to where you're walking, Sawbones!"

Prontier then stepped onto the bridge and moved forward cautiously. I followed him at a distance of 15 meters. We made fairly good progress, as the bridge gyrated less than I had feared it would. When I was about in the center of the bridge I saw that the silver strands of the net were only an arm's length below. Waccor had reached the other side. I thought I could make out a signal from him in the darkness, and then he disappeared into a dark opening in the building wall. Shortly thereafter, Fratulon also disappeared inside.

Suddenly, Prontier let out a cry and he made such a strenuous movement that the bridge began to shake. I saw him let go of the guideropes to bring his energy weapon into play. He was firing at something below us. There was a light flash below, followed by the death cry of a Zagor. Against the starlit sands of the desert a shadowy group of moving figures was to be seen.

I also brought out my beamer and fired into the file of Zagors under us. They were angling for the Professor with long, grappling hooks.

"Don't bother about the Zagors!" I called to him. "Just keep going. Just a little further up the bridge and you'll be out of their reach!"

But Prontier was no longer able to follow my advice. The swaying of the bridge caused him to lose his grip. He slipped down and only just managed to hold onto one of the heavy supporting cables. I ran to him but arrived too late. The barbed ends of the grappling poles had caught in the lower ends of his clothing, and the Zagors tugged so hard that Prontier's resistance was overcome.

He fell screaming through the net below and hit the soft sand, whereupon the Zagors immediately tossed

him upward again. After three tries at it, they landed Prontier's body on one of the arm-thick silvery strands of the web, where it remained.

Automatically I turned away. Often enough had I been forced to witness what happened to the unfortunate victims who came in contact with those gleaming strands. Prontier could not be helped anymore. All I could do was forge ahead to the other end of the suspension bridge.

There two powerful Arkonides were waiting for me, who promptly relieved me of my weapons.

The same fate had already befallen Fratulon, and I heard him cursing and complaining about this shameful way of treating a physician and surgeon.

"No need to get worked up about it," said a man with a deep, resonant voice. "We've left you the tools of your profession—and besides, you can't fight sicknesses with a sword."

Several men laughed. I was shoved through a passage into a room that was illuminated by two torches. There I saw six men forming a ring around Waccor and Fratulon. One of them was of average height but had an unusually powerful physique. This Arkonide wore chest armor like Fratulon, and as I came in he was in the act of tossing the sword, Skarg, to one of the other men.

Fratulon whirled around swiftly and caught the weapon by the hilt before the other man could grasp it. I reacted instantly and landed a heavy blow into the mid-section of the startled man next to me, whereupon I relieved him of the sword he had taken from me. Then I sprang forward, shoved my way through the men forming the circle, and placed my back to Fratulon, who had already taken up his battle stance.

From a safe distance the muscular Arkonide asked

him: "Have you come here as a medical man or a barricade buster?"

"For the very reason that I come to you of my own *free will* in the capacity of a doctor, I will not permit you to treat me as a prisoner," said Fratulon. "If you need my help, I'm willing to give it to you. But when you want my Skarg, instead, I'm forced to take it from you."

The husky Arkonide who seemed to be the spokesman was non-plussed for a moment, but then he laughed. "Your words have impressed me, Sawbones," he said, appreciatively. "You have a right to keep the sword. You know you have to excuse my actions here. I've been dealing so exclusively with bandits and bums that I've forgotten how you're supposed to treat a gentleman. My name is Plyturon. May I make amends with a handshake?"

Fratulon was so hesitant about taking the proferred hand that a questioning frown came to Plytoron's brow.

"It could well be," Fratulon explained, "that the local disease is contagious and can be transmitted by contact."

Plytoron laughed again. "Ah yes, the disease! It's definitely not transferable or by now we'd all be down with it. But come now, I'll take you two to Komyal. It's a pity that Prontier is no longer alive. The Voolynesian would have liked very much to talk to him."

"His death is no great loss," interjected Waccor quickly. "This sawbones and his helper have had his full confidence. They know plenty about the Professor and can tell everything to Komyal that he wants to know about him. Of that I am certain."

"Well, if that's the case," said Plyturon, "then we can forget Prontier."

Fratulon's quick glance at me was a confirmation

that we were thinking the same thing. Waccor must have told Komyal about Prontier's treasure—and he had probably just now tried to apprise Plyturon of the fact that we knew where the treasure had been hidden.

We were led into a windowless chamber the other entrances of which had all been walled up. One half of the vaulted hall was lighted by ten torches. The other half lay in darkness and was separated from the rest of the room by a crennelated wall that was about as high as a man's head.

In the center of this wall was a portal-like structure reaching to the ceiling, and its gates were standing open. Between these open gates was located a strange kind of vehicle—or at least that was the best designation I could find for it.

It consisted of a giant bowl, about 2 meters in diameter, which was supported by 4 wheels and 6 articulated supports designed for forward locomotion. Within the bowl lay a gelatinous mass of something that appeared to be pulsating.

"Komyal," said Plyturon, "here is the medico and his assistant." When he had finished making this announcement, he drew back to the wall.

From the bowl emerged a large pseudopod, in the densified end of which a human face formed. The eyes stared at us, the mouth moved and spoke in perfect Arkonide. "I should have thought that you would respond more quickly to my call, Sawbones. If you had departed immediately after receiving my radio message you would have had to arrive here long before sundown."

"We were held up, Komyal," answered Fratulon. "First we lost our dune rover, after which we ran into a fight with the Zagors, and finally we fell into the hands of Lay Manos' band. But I hope that our help doesn't come too late. Where are the men who have become

afflicted by this epidemic? I'll be glad to take care of them at once."

"There's no epidemic, no plague, no disease at all," answered Komyal. The pseudopod with the human face turned to one side as the Voolynesian added: "In sending out that distress call I was merely doing my friend, Vafron, a favor. Is this sawbones the man you are seeking, Vafron?"

Behind the crenellated wall loomed five figures which could not be distinguished in detail because of the poor illumination there. But they were quite recognizably humanoid, in fact Arkonide.

One of these men said: "Yes, this sawbones, Fratulon, has fallen into my trap."

9/ AMBUSH IN THE HALL OF SPLENDOR

The greatest danger of all had been prepared for only in theory.

Fratulon had put Atlan through countless tests to prove himself. Those proofs which called upon his psychic capabilities seemed to balance out equally with those which challenged his physical qualities. It was important for Atlan to have a quick mind, but it was still more important for him to know how to handle himself with weapons. He must be capable of defending himself in every type of situation.

This was an additional reason why Fratulon took him along on dangerous missions where not infrequently the outcome could be a matter of life and death. So far, Atlan had withstood every test and had overcome every danger. It was a good point of departure for the battles for his existence which were yet to come.

But Fratulon was not certain whether or not Atlan could also pass the test, alone and unaided, against Orbanashol's special bloodhounds. For these cold-blooded bounty hunters were deadly, stronger and more dangerous than all the opponents that Atlan had encountered so far . . .

* * * *

The distress signal had only been sent out in order to lure us into a trap! And fools that we were, we had just blindly bumbled our way into it.

In this light it may even have been a blessing that we were held up by our encounters with the Zagors and Lay Manos' group. Otherwise, we might long since have

been dead. On the other hand, we might have become more cautious and suspicious had we not been distracted by these other events.

At the moment, however, the question of who this Vafron might be and why he had drawn us into this trap was unimportant. I drew my sword at the same moment as did Fratulon. Waccor jumped back from us and joined Komyal's men who stood along the wall. I calculated that our chances with them were fair since they were only equipped with swords like ourselves.

"Come on, you scoundrels!" shouted Fratulon. "You'll find out that the private belly-stitcher of the Tatto, Armanck Declanter, knows his way around with something more than a scalpel!"

"Stop!" cried Vafron. He had taken a few steps out from his concealment and was holding up his hand peremptorily. And now I saw that he was wearing a tattered uniform of the Arkonide Fleet. "Komyal, tell your men they are to make no use of their weapons!" He had turned to the Voolynesian, who had exhuded a number of extra pseudopods which now extended from their container bowl. "Our agreement was that you would deliver the doctor to me alive."

The Arkonide-moulded mouth of the Voolynesian entoned: "He belongs to you, Vafron. None of my people will harm a single whisker of this Tatto's physician. I myself am interested in keeping him alive."

Vafron looked in surprise at the pseudo-head of the creature. "Strange that you should suddenly take interest in him, Komyal," he said. "I've paid you for delivering me Fratulon unharmed. But your words almost sound as if you wanted to go against this agreement now."

Komyal's simulated face revealed an almost human grin. "By no means, Vafron. But the point in time of

that delivery will be decided by me. Before I hand him over to you, there are a few things I wish to find out . . . ''

''I'll not have you haggling and bartering over me!'' shouted Fratulon angrily. ''Just come on! We'll see if you are a match for me and my assistant!''

The only one who accepted the challenge was Plyturon. He drew his sword and took a professional battle stance. ''Fratulon,'' he said, with a malicious smile, ''you look to me like a man who's carried a victory wreath or two from the arena in his time—but I must confide that I was also a gladiator.''

''Get back, Plyturon!'' commanded Komyal. ''No blood will be spilled in this room today! And you, Fratulon, shall see that you have no choice but to surrender to me without resistance.''

When Fratulon turned to face the Voolynesian he found that he could not tear his gaze away from him again. I saw a change come over Sawbones. His face tensed and twisted as though he were being subjected to a superhuman force, as though he were marshalling all of his strength to combat something that had seized him.

It was evident to me at once that an uncanny power was being projected from the Voolynesian, which had brought Fratulon under its spell. Even though I was aware of this I glanced at Komyal—and was also unable to break loose from his gaze.

The formless, colloidal thing flowed over the edge of the bowl to the floor and glided with a wavy motion toward us. Komyal had extended two pseudopods. One of them had formed itself into a human face; on the end of the other one an oversized giant eye took form.

A magical force emerged from this eye. I could neither turn my gaze away from it nor think clearly. I

was devoid of my own will, and though I sought to think of other things and to turn away from the glowing, iridescent eye, it was to no avail.

Fratulon was worse off then I was because it was on him that Komyal was concentrating his hypnotic powers. Out of the corner of my eye I had a blurred impression of my old Sawbones trembling and falling to his knees. He was using every effort of will to combat the influence that had taken possession of him.

"You cannot oppose me, Fratulon," I heard the Voolynesian saying. "You must obey me. You will tell me everything I wish to know from you."

"No . . . " Fratulon's lips murmured almost inaudibly.

"Yes!" said Komyal firmly. "You will truthfully answer all of my questions. I will ask nothing else from you. It is too bad that Prontier is not alive, for I would have been able to extract the desired information much easier from him. But even you will tell me what I wish to know!"

"I . . . will do it!" whispered Fratulon.

The amorphous mass of living substance had almost reached us. Now the giant pseudo-eye rose higher until it was on a level with Fratulon's face. "You have knowledge of a treasure that Prontier has obtained?" asked Komyal.

"Yes, he told me everything about it!" said Fratulon. He spoke as though blurting everything out would free him from a terrible pressure. The words fairly bubbled from his lips. "In Zagooth he has made many valuable finds and has hoarded them in his stronghold. But they aren't there anymore. Prontier distrusted his men—and with good cause, as it turned out. Waccor betrayed him to Lay Manos and the Manolian stole Prontier's daughter, Azhira, in order to hold her for

ransom and get the treasure in exchange. The exchange is supposed to take place at dawn . . . ''

''There is an interesting development,'' observed Komyal. ''So Prontier had decided to accede to Manos' demands?''

''Yes, he had no other interest than to see his daughter again,'' Fratulon blurted out. ''After Ardelo took his fall, we sent Ice Claw as the mediator to the Manolian. He was to transmit to him the conditions of the transfer . . . ''

''And what is the gist of those conditions?''

''At dawn, Lay Manos is to bring Azhira to Marauthan's main reception hall. That's where we will hand the treasure over to him . . . ''

''That you will not do!'' interjected Komyal scornfully.

I saw the luminous eye begin to darken as the Voolynesian flowed back to his dish vehicle. As the hypnotic effect of the giant eye faded away, I began to emerge from its grip proportionately and regain the ability to think clearly.

My first clear realization was the fact that Fratulon had not broken down even under the pressure of hypnosis. He had tricked the Voolynesian by appearing to reveal everything he knew, but the ruse had actually enabled him to dodge many questions of a more dangerous kind. I couldn't help marveling at old Sawbones. Although he had not been able to avoid the hypnotic power of the Voolynesian entirely, he had nevertheless succeeded in imparting to him more or less what he wanted to let him know. He had only transmitted those details which tied in with what we had planned.

Fratulon put on a show of breathing heavily and balling his fists in feigned anger. ''You out-smarted

me, Komyal," he said. "But don't think that makes you win the game. Even if you know that the treasure is hidden in Marauthan's reception hall, it won't do you any good. You won't be able to salvage it because Lay Manos will be there before you."

"I have often questioned just how tough Lay Manos' outfit really is," said the Voolynesian. "Until now I have put off putting his alleged strength to the test, since there was no reason for it. But now I have a good excuse to bring that braggart his destruction. Vafron, I'll show you how it's done around here to become the ruler of the Marauthanian ruins."

A faint smile touched Vafron's sharp-lined features. "I'm not at all concerned with governing the inhabitants of these ruins," he said. "When I requested all the groups here to unite themselves under my command, I only did it so that I could back myself up with as many men as possible. There was no way I could know that Fratulon would dispense with the support of Declanter's troops and that he'd come into the ruins comparatively alone. I've never had the intention of being a resident here. The ruins are all yours. And now that you've gotten what you wanted and Fratulon is of no further use to you, you ought to turn him over to me. I ask for nothing more."

"He's yours," Komyal asserted. "But I'm not quite through with him yet. He has to accompany me to the reception hall. Once I'm in possession of the treasure I'll hand him over to you."

"I'm warning you, Komyal, don't press this game too far," said Vafron threateningly.

The Voolynesian remained unimpressed. "If you simply must try your strength against somebody, Vafron, then save it for the fight with Lay Manos' men. And if it means so much to you to keep this Fratulon of

yours alive, then you'd better keep a sharp eye on him. I'm holding you responsible for that—that he doesn't escape, and that nothing happens to him."

Vafron's cold eyes turned to Fratulon as he said: "I'll take care of him alright!"

In that moment I was wondering whether or not these two men had known each other in the past and maybe had an old account to settle between them. But as I examined Fratulon's profile carefully I saw that his face was devoid of expression.

* * * *

"I've never seen Vafron a single time in my life," said Fratulon. We had arrived at the loftiest of the cone-shaped edifices. He spoke to me the first time since leaving Komyal's stronghold.

"So what's bothering you about him?" I wanted to know.

"I'm just asking myself how Vafron is supposed to keep an eye on us when he doesn't even show himself," answered Fratulon.

We had covered the distance from Komyal's hideout to the building with the reception hall by way of the labyrinths. This offered the advantage that we didn't have to fear falling into an ambush by the Zagors, because in that portion of the labyrinths which lay under the ruined city the reptilian creatures were seldom seen. But Komyal had chosen the Zagooth route primarily so that Lay Manos' men would not be able to observe the deployment of his fighting forces. It was intended that the Manolian should move unsuspectingly into a trap—exactly as Fratulon and I had figured it out in the first place.

Our main problem was how to elude our guards in order to free Ice Claw and Azhira, who certainly must

have been left behind in Lay Manos' lair because the latter would probably be too shrewd to bring them here. Yet the fact that Komyal's men continually surrounded us was the lesser difficulty. Fratulon seemed to be more concerned about the fact that Vafron held himself in the background even though he was responsible for our safety.

Since Fratulon didn't express himself about it on his own accord, however, I approached him on the subject directly. "What do you think of Vafron?" I came right out and asked him.

"I can't quite figure him out," Fratulon replied.

I persisted: "He seems to me to be more dangerous than Komyal and Lay Manos put together."

"In any case, he's dangerous to *us*," was all he would say.

Komyal had 8 powerful men to carry him in his dish container although its wheeled base had its own motive power. I wasn't quite sure whether the motor was defective or if he had himself carried merely to show off his power.

I was inclined to believe that the Voolynesian possessed the heaviest striking force within the ruins. For after all he was in command of 50 men, which was certainly at least twice the number that Manos had at his disposal.

There could actually be little doubt about the outcome of the forthcoming battle. Komyal not only had a superiority in numbers; he had the greater tactical advantage. While his men could carefully prepare themselves for what they knew they'd be facing, Lay Manos was unaware of the ambush.

Komyal's men deployed themselves around the great reception hall and took positions close to the outer approaches so that they could cut off Manos' men from

retreating. They also found concealment at higher elevations so that their arrows would be within range of Manos' most feared weapon, the giant birds.

By means of a simple device they were able to reach inaccessible places where no one would expect to find them. This device was a long rope with a barbed hook on the end of it. They were so skilled at throwing the heavy barb that they were able to assail vertical walls. Catching the hook securely on some protuberance or recessed spot, they would then climb up the rope into lofty hiding places.

This method of overcoming vertical obstacles was not new to me, because on a number of occasions Fratulon and I had put it to good use. But until now I had not known that the inhabitants of the ruins were familiar with it.

Marauthan's former hall of splendor was still fairly well preserved, if one discounted the fact that the ceiling had fallen in and that only the sky spanned the gap between the lofty walls of the ruin. The local inhabitants had moved the fallen debris to the sides, stacking it against the walls and forward in such a manner that a descending pattern of tier-like levels had been formed, thus creating a sort of amphitheater. By this process an arena had finally come into being, in which the inhabitants of the ruins more often than not conducted their war games.

Here it often happened that prisoners were forced to fight Zagors, or tests of courage were required here of new members joining one of the groups, or duels were fought between the leaders of several groups. In any case the inhabitants of these ruins never seemed to be lacking in reasons for conducting their war games.

"They're coming!" cried one of Komyal's bowmen from a high lookout point.

Immediately, all the rest vanished into their hiding places. Komyal had his container brought in under artfully arranged monolothic stones which formed a vault-like enclosure where he would be safe from Lay Manos' bird beasts. The warning call was a signal for our guards to drive us out into the open arena. At the same time they aimed their spears and arrows at us so that we would have no chance to escape.

"Alright now, act like you're free!" ordered one of our 4 guards—it was Plyturon. "You have to carry on as though nothing has happened so that Manos doesn't get suspicious. If you try to warn him you'll become a couple of walking pin-cushions!"

In the air above the arena the first of the giant birds were already appearing, each of them carrying one of Lay Manos' warriors in its claws. Most of the latter were Manolians, so at this distance I couldn't make out whether or not Lay Manos himself was among them.

The birds deposited their human cargos on various blocks of stone and masonry around the arena and then rose into the air to circle above us. By the time about 20 of Lay Manos' men had deployed themselves around the arena, an unusually large bird appeared with a Manolian in its talons. As it swept down toward us, I recognized Lay Manos.

"That lousy crook really did leave Azhira and Ice Claw back in his hideout," I said angrily, although we had both figured on it in our plans.

"That won't do him much good," said Fratulon.

"How are we going to handle this mess?" I asked.

As Lay Manos was hovering within only 5 meters of the arena's floor, somebody shouted: "It's an ambush!"

It was a signal for the start of the battle. While Komyal's bowmen brought the bird beasts under at-

tack, his swordsmen and lancers charged upon Lay Manos' men.

Lay Manos' favorite bird, Ayff, was the first victim of the hail of arrows. The loyal creature dropped into a tail spin, still holding its master aloft until it had brought him to a soft landing near the first rocky tiers of the amphitheater, on the floor of the arena, where even then it sought to shield him with its widespread wings.

"Let's get out of here!" Fratulon shouted to me, and we ran for the protection of some of the ruin fragments.

But he came to a stop short of the goal. Plyturon and the other three guards with their bows and arrows blocked our way.

"Only way you'll get past us," said Plyturon, "is when you've led us to the treasure."

These were the last words he spoke, because in that moment he and his companions were struck down by a fiery beam of energy. Our path was free—Lay Manos' men had inadvertently blasted the obstruction out of our way. I wondered briefly how they had gotten hold of the ray weapons but didn't dwell on the question. The battle exploded around us.

From the direction of the stone chamber where Komyal and his bodyguards had taken refuge came a frightful din and clamor. As I looked there I saw one of the monolithic supports, melting away under an energy beam, which caused the entire structure to collapse, burying Komyal beneath it.

"I'll bet that Voolynesian didn't expect a turn of events like that," I said.

Fratulon bent down and picked up two discarded ropes which were attached to grapple hooks. He tossed one of them to me. "We may still be able to use these climbing ropes," he told me.

I knew what he had in mind, but at the moment I was

concerned with another matter. The first thing we had to do was to leave this fighting area behind us.

There was also no way of forgetting Vafron, and I kept wondering where he had disappeared to.

10/ IN THE SPELL OF THE SINGING GOD

Aside from his mission of shielding Atlan, Fratulon had to guard himself against a standing death warrant, owing to his intimate knowledge of certain Arkon secrets of state.

Orbanashol III was a fierce and ruthless ruler. As Imperator of the Greater Empire he consolidated his power by mercilessly destroying every opponent, each in his turn, and by instituting large-scale punitive actions against races, peoples or civilizations which refused to submit to his regime. Although aside from these little side skirmishes his imperial troops and war fleets had been deeply involved in a galaxy-wide war against the methane breathers for some years already, now as before the Arkonides were at the flowering pinnacle of their development.

However, this high status was in no wise attributable to Orbanashol III. Quite to the contrary, he was in the process of slowly but surely destroying everything that his predecessor, Gonozal VII, had built up.

Orbanashol III had only come to the throne because his brother, Gonozal VII, had lost his life in a hunting accident. At least this had been the official version. But there was a rumor to the effect that Orbanashol III had instigated the hunting accident in order to seize the power for himself. And no one knew better than Fratulon how much truth was behind this rumor. For the physician in attendance to the Tatto of Gortavor, Armanck Declanter, had also been the personal physician to Gonozal VII, and Orbanashol's seizure of the throne had consequently made it necessary for him to flee for his life. He knew too much.

But he had also left Arkon and the Crystal Palace behind him in order to save the life of Atlan, who was then but 4 years of age . . .

* * * *

"Here's where we have to climb up," said Fratulon, and he pointed to the wall that rose vertically before us.

Forty meters overhead we saw the breaks in the wall which led into Lay Manos' throneroom. Not far away, the needle-like wall fragment rose upward which supported the nesting place of the great birds of prey. At the present moment there were only two of the birds in evidence.

We had negotiated the staircase that Manos' men had constructed and had thus climbed up through a number of levels of the building. But inasmuch as the fortress was doubtlessly being guarded by some of his men, we did not dare to approach the drawbridge. The last part of our journey had to be accomplished by climbing the vertical wall. It was the only means of penetrating the stronghold without being detected.

Fratulon swung the grappling hook and hurled it powerfully aloft. At the very first try the hook caught hold in a fissure some 20 meters above us. I required three tries before I also found an anchoring point for my own hook.

We clambered up the loosely flapping ropes and reached the first stage of our climb without incident. Here was a projection of the wall which left enough space for both of us to stand on. I looked across toward the giant birds and noted that they were still undisturbed, acting as though they had not yet discovered us.

"If we're lucky," said Fratulon, "they'll remain peaceful."

I harbored the secret hope that they were trained to respond only to Lay Manos' silent mental commands.

But I did not express it—perhaps because life on Gortavor had made me somewhat superstitious.

"Are we going to take the last stage in one throw?" I asked, doubtfully.

"Give it a try," Fratulon advised.

I started the boarding rope to swinging and with each revolution let out more line. Then I finally heaved the hook upward with full force. I heard it clanking and scratching as it struck the wall, but it soon dropped down again. On the second try, the hook took hold.

"See if you can match that, Sawbones," I challenged, grinning at him.

He gravely shook his head. "No time to play games. This time we'll use the one rope. You go up and I'll follow."

"Too bad," I answered, disappointed. "I'll bet you would have needed more tries this time than I did. But you're right as usual."

I clamped my sword between my teeth in order to have it ready in case of any surprises, after which I went up the rope hand over hand. Just beneath the wall opening, I paused to listen. There was no sound to be heard from the throneroom, but I didn't yet trust the situation. Using wall protuberances and crevices to support me, I climbed along until I was under the next opening. At that point I listened again. Still no sound inside. Only then did I risk raising myself up into full view so that I could take a careful look into the interior.

It was empty.

I signaled to Fratulon that it was all clear and swung into the room. With sword in hand, I took a look around. When Fratulon arrived, I could report confidently that no one was present and our entry had not been noticed.

He merely nodded, moving silently to the exit of the throneroom. Before he stepped into the adjacent room

he stopped and pointed ahead. There lay two men on the floor whose bodies had been riddled by energy beams. Obviously someone had already been here before us—which was all the more reason for being super cautious.

After a few more steps, Fratulon stopped again. I also listened, and it seemed to me I could hear distant voices.

"Somebody's talking," I whispered to Sawbones.

He nodded, moving forward again. In one hand he carried Skarg and in the other was his coiled boarding rope. I followed his example and also coiled up my rope, carrying it with me ready for use.

We came closer to the origin of the voices. But suddenly they were silenced. Then came the low sound of a woman crying or moaning.

Azhira!

Fratulon tensed and hurried his pace. I wanted to caution him not to do anything rash, but he was already on his way. When I came around the next bend in the corridor he had already vanished from my sight. Two passages branched off at sharp angles in separate directions. There was a tell-tale sound to my left, and again I heard the soft whimpering of a woman.

Someone was saying angrily: "Go ahead and scream—I want them to hear you!"

Nursing the hunch that both passages led to the same place, I took the one on the right—and that was our salvation. I came to a room where the ceiling had caved in, revealing a patch of open sky above. Before me were 5 Arkonides wearing tattered uniforms of the Imperial Fleet. One of them—it was Vafron—held Azhira in front of him as a living shield, with a dagger at her breast.

I was also aware that one wall of the room was overgrown with creepers and vines of various kinds.

Within a few steps of me was Ice Claw, tied to the wall with the rough, heavy lianas.

Vafron pressed the dagger still harder against Azhira's breast. Her face twisted in pain—but then suddenly her eyes widened.

"Fratulon!" she cried out in astonishment.

The stupid little fool!

Vafron and his men would not have discovered Fratulon if her cry had not betrayed his presence.

The men brought their rayguns into play. Azhira tore herself away from Vafron and ran to Fratulon who had jumped back into the corridor. An energy beam flashed out. I let out a wordless cry in order to distract the men from Azhira and Fratulon, and it did cause them to turn their attention to me. It confused them to be faced with enemies from two directions at once.

Again a ray beam flashed, but not in my direction. Azhira cried out and arched backwards even as I slung the grappling hook forward with all my strength. The heavy barb struck one of the men in the chest and penetrated his body. The force of its impact knocked him back into the midst of his companions.

It gave me time to turn to Ice Claw and free him with my sword. But it was ill-advised since it gave the three remaining men a moment of respite. They had recovered from their initial surprise and now faced us in earnest. They would surely have shot me down in cold blood had it not been for an unexpected occurrence.

Two mighty shadows loomed above us—the two giant birds from the nest. I had no idea what had excited them but was grateful for their interference. They plunged down through the opening in the roof onto Vafron's men. Vafron shot one of them, but before an energy beam struck the other one it had sunk its talons into the face of one of the men.

"Let's go, Ice Claw!" I yelled to the chretkor, and the two of us retreated through the passage I had chosen.

At the intersection we joined Fratulon.

Behind us we heard the injured man cry out as though he'd been impaled. "I'm blind! By the gods, I can't see anymore!"

Fratulon had also perceived that our only chance lay in flight. It would have been suicide to close in battle with Vafron and his men. With their energy weapons they outmatched us by far.

"What about Azhira?" I asked as we ran along through the passages and rooms and stairs of Manos' stronghold.

"She's dead!" was the answer.

She had shielded Fratulon from a death shot with her body.

"Vafron came here over the drawbridge," Ice Claw told us. "He made no bones about advertising that Manos was also a henchman of his.

"Let's hope Manos hasn't pulled it up yet," I said.

"He's not able to," commented Ice Claw, and added: "As payment for his services, Vafron has sent him to his Great Reward."

We were almost there. To my best recollection, all that still lay before us was one staircase and a short passage, and then we would be at the drawbridge. I was not mistaken. When we reached the end of the corridor beyond the stairs, there was the entrance hall—and beyond it the drawbridge still spanned the abyss.

On the bridge itself crouched a man who was wounded and who had apparently dragged himself there with his last ounce of strength. He was holding something in his hand. When he saw us approaching, he laughed loudly and made a sudden movement.

"Duck!" I yelled as I threw myself to the ground.

In the next moment there was a tremendous explosion on the drawbridge. The wounded man had committed suicide in order to blow the bridge to pieces.

The explosion had hardly subsided before Fratulon jumped up and ran to the dropoff. He swung his boarding rope over his head and then hurled it across the gap. The barbed hook caught on the other side, apparently caught fast in a ground declivity.

Fratulon tugged on it with all his strength in order to test the rope's holding ability. When he was satisfied that it would support our weight, he tied his end of it to some heavy vines that grew against the wall.

"Alright, Atlan—you first!" he ordered.

I responded without argument and moved across the abyss with a wide-swinging movement, hand over hand. Even before I had reached the other side, Ice Claw followed me. The rope supported both of us.

I drew myself up onto the opposite platform and waited to help Ice Claw. After both of us had solid ground under our feet, Fratulon ventured across the chasm. Since he wasn't much lighter than Ice Claw and myself together, I added my weight to the grappling hook by standing on it. It was no harm to play it safe.

Sawbones made it. He came puffing up onto the platform and yanked the hook out of its anchorage. In the very moment that Vafron appeared in the fortress entrance, Fratulon hurled the boarding hook across. Vafron had to take cover in order to avoid the dangerous missile, and it gained us the time we needed to get to safety.

We hurried down the steps.

"Now we've got a big enough lead on them!" panted Fratulon. "By the time Vafron and his 3 men get across the gap we'll be way out of range of those beamers!"

"He only has two men now," I retorted. "The third one had his eyes scratched out by one of the birds."

"That makes one of them for each of us," said Ice Claw.

"They're still superior to us with those energy weapons," warned Fratulon. "There's no choice left but to lure them down into Zagooth. We can't face them until then, because we'd certainly be no good against them in the desert."

"Instead of facing them at all," I suggested, "wouldn't it be better to try to reach Tarkihl? Maybe then they'll give up the chase."

Fratulon shook his head. "Vafron will never rest until he's intercepted us. He's gambled everything in the hopes of catching us. He even made our escape from Marauthan's hall possible so that he could set up an ambush for us in Lay Manos' hideout—because he knew that's where we would go next. No. Vafron will not give up."

We finally left the stairs behind us and stood on level ground. The Spider Desert lay before us in the sunshine. The air shimmered and we were half-blinded by the glare of the sun reflecting from the silvery strands of the web. The heat was almost unbearable.

Ice Claw clung to my arm with his frigid hands. "I'm melting!" he exclaimed fearfully.

Behind us the footsteps of our pursuers were audible on the stairs.

"What are we still waiting for?" grunted Fratulon. He started to move but I placed a hand on his shoulder, holding him back.

"Don't you notice something?" I asked him. "A sound in the air—like humming. Take a good look at the filaments of the web. You can't seem them clearly. They seem to be slightly out of focus and blurred. They're vibrating, Fratulon!"

Not far from us a Zagor appeared. He seemed not to notice us. Instead, he moved with a sort of ambling and wandering gait through the desert.

"If we go into the desert now and are exposed to hallucinations," said Ice Claw with a shudder, "we'll be lost!"

"Would you rather surrender yourself to Vafron?" asked Fratulon, and he ran onward into the desert.

A shout came from behind us. "There they are!"

Then I hesitated no longer but fled also into the desert, with Ice Claw close behind me.

"I guess it's all the same to me whether I get shot or I melt away in the heat of the sun," muttered the chretkor.

Suddenly an arc of light like an intertwined rainbow seemed to emerge before me—and I stepped into it.

* * * *

It didn't do me any good to tell myself that this was only a mirage produced by the strands of the web. Even though I was conscious of being victimized by it, the hallucination could not be dispelled.

The illusion was complete.

Beneath me was a broad band of light that was composed of all colors of the spectrum. The rainbow path was easy to walk on, feeling soft and resilient under foot. It made a steep ascent before me, reached a high crest and then made a broad curve to finally complete its circle.

The most fascinating part about it was that the color band widened out with distance rather than narrowing in perspective. Even while I ascended I still felt that I was on a level surface. Gravity seemed to be effective in all directions of the rainbow on which I found myself. I ascended yet seemed to stay on the ground, and I developed the impression that I was running in one spot

while the rainbow continued to move beneath me. I seemed to be some laboratory animal running in an endless treadmill, getting nowhere although it raced beneath me like mad.

It made no sense to me to keep moving in one spot, so I attempted to push my way to the edge of the rainbow. I left the blue zone, ran across various hues of green into the yellow band, changed from there into the orange area and then reached the field of red. I must be almost there! Lavender, violet, blue—now I must be at the rainbow's extremity. Blue—green—yellow—red . . . I became desperate.

Then the apparition dissolved.

I was in the desert once more.

What had become of Fratulon and Ice Claw? Where were Vafron and his companions?

And where was the giant spider web? I looked up into the sky. There were no silvery strands above me. Was I no longer in the Spider Desert?

Suddenly, there was Tarkihl. It loomed above the desert like a low bronze mountain. Someone was running toward me. It was Farnathia, beloved Farnathia!

"Atlan—watch out!"

I threw myself at the feet of the girl of my dreams.

There was an explosion as though a sun had burst above me. Although I had not looked into the exploding ball of fire, I was blinded. Farnathia had dissolved into nothingness. It must have been caused by Fratulon's calling to me.

Instead of Farnathia I suddenly saw a soldier. He and I were standing together in the midst of the nothingness. Only the two of us. He moved toward me in a strange manner while red flashes seemed to shoot from his right arm. Some of the flashes struck me in the face and I sensed a sweetish taste on my lips.

Blood!

The soldier was bleeding. His uniform was in rags. He seemed not to notice me. There was a transfigured look on his face as though he were seeing something miraculous which was veiled from my own vision.

One of Vafron's men!—I thought with a start. He was wounded and couldn't see me. His right arm hung limply from his side, but the left hand was raised up, clutching a ray weapon. His index finger curved inward, and suddenly there was a blinding sunburst very nearby.

"I've caught you, Fratulon!" shouted the man. His voice sounded strangely pleasant in my ears, but I was displeased that he had mistaken me for Fratulon. "And I'm going to kill you whether Vafron likes it or not!"

Suddenly I was seeing strange images that were anything but pleasant visions—somebody wearing armor, striking at a man who was spewing death from his energy weapon. The man with the sword was Fratulon; the other collapsed in a fountain of blood. Then this realistic picture instantly vanished—and instead I saw the soldier burst into bloom. All over his body it seemed that red buds were shooting out of him, unfolding flowery leaves of blood which then became a red flood that poured into the desert sands.

Something grabbed hold of me.

I heard Fratulon's hoarse voice. "Look at him closely. He was one of our enemies. I have killed him."

I stared at the sea of red blossoms. They wilted and flowed away, becoming grainy like desert sand.

"Atlan, do you see the desert sands, saturated red with the blood of our enemy?"

Yes, I saw the reality of it!

"Shake off your illusion!" he urged me. "It works if

you concentrate on specific points of reality. There —concentrate on that spot of blood!''

''Everything is swimming in front of my eyes!'' I muttered irritably. In the place of the blood-soaked desert sands was a sea of red water.

''Our enemies aren't faring any better,'' Fratulon explained. ''They've also been hit by these hallucinations—much more than I. Many times I can shake off the mirages and see clearly. You must try it, too, Atlan!''

I made an effort to do so, and for a moment I really saw Fratulon before me with his chest armor all spattered with the enemy's blood. ''I can't look at any more red!'' I cried out—and was again immersed in the reddish ocean.

''Stay here. Don't budge from the spot!'' Fratulon ordered. ''I see one of the enemy watching Ice Claw, but he doesn't seem to consider him as an opponent . . . ''

Fratulon seemed to swim away, or was he wading? No, that wasn't right, because when a person waded through water he had to go against some kind of resistance. Fratulon was running as though there were no obstacle at all before him. In actuality there was no resistance, the water only existed in the world of my illusions.

I held out in my place as Fratulon had instructed me to do. The waves rocked me back and forth and I seemed to be getting seasick. It's nothing but imagination!—I told myself. But it didn't help the nausea that was rising in me. I had to get out of there. Then I saw salvation over my head—a pier or platform of some kind. How steady it seemed in the plunging surf.

I jumped but fell short of my goal. I blinked, and then

I recognized what it really was. Instead of a lifesaving landing platform I was looking at the deadly web of silvery strands!

The other one also made a jump. Who he was or where he came from I didn't know. For me he was just the *other one*. Did he also wish to save himself from the foaming sea on a more "peaceful shore?" Let him go ahead, and then there'd be one less scoundrel in the world.

But what then, if the *other one* was Ice Claw!?

"Ice Claw!" I yelled, and walked across the raging tide toward him. "Ice Claw, don't—it will be your death!"

"Now I'll get you, you hell hound!" bellowed the *other one*. It was not Ice Claw, after all. "I'll break your neck with my bare hands, old Belly-stitcher!"

Then I knew that the *other one* was either Vafron or one of his men. Now Fratulon appeared at my left, but the man looked upward as though Sawbones could be seen in that direction. Undoubtedly he saw him there, but he didn't know that a mirage-like reflection of the air was fooling him. Fratulon used it to his advantage. With drawn Skarg, he crept toward his adversary—and the latter believed that the threat approached him from above.

He sprang upward, and this time he managed to grasp something. But his cry of triumph died on his lips before he could get it out. I stared at him, fascinated —he had turned into a creature of incredible beauty. I knew what was there in reality, although my eyes were shielded from it.

"That's one more out of the way!" I heard Fratulon sing out. "Now all that's left is Vafron! Here—I'm bringing Ice Claw to you. From now on, the two of you stay together!"

Somebody clutched at my clothing. "You're cold as

a block of ice, Atlan!" I heard Ice Claw's familiar voice.

For a moment I saw the chretkor's crystalline face, but then I was alone again, enshrouded by veils of greenish light. Only the pressure of Ice Claw's hand told me that he was there.

"There's nothing cold around here for miles, Ice Claw," I said. "We are in the Spider Desert and the sun is burning down on us. You have to get that into your consciousness."

"But I'm cold!" wailed the chretkor. "What good is it for my reason to grasp the truth of things? For me my feelings are what count. And I feel the coldness creeping into my body. Don't bump me, Atlan, or I'll break to pieces!"

"Ice Claw, it's hot!" I insisted, trying to make it sink into his mind.

"No! No!" he countered. "Whatever you say—I feel myself growing stiff! And the cold is coming from you! Dammit, Atlan, you're cold!"

He let loose of me abruptly.

"Ice Claw, don't run away!" I called after him desperately, groping about me. But the chretkor was no longer there.

"I need a warm climate." I heard his voice emerge from somewhere out of the green veils of light. "Got to have warmth and I'm going to find it!"

"Ice Claw!"

There was a sound like a death rattle, followed by a sigh of relief. "I've found a source of warmth, Atlan!" cried Ice Claw triumphantly. The coldness can't get the best of me anymore. I can warm myself here."

I shuddered instinctively. I stumbled against something. As I groped about with my hands I felt the contours of a humanoid figure that crouched in front of me.

The greenish light layers began to dissolve. I was back in the Spider Desert again. At my feet I saw Ice Claw kneeling on top of Vafron with his taloned hands gripping the area of the other's heart. Vafron had died a quick death. His heart must have turned to ice with the swiftness of thought.

I looked about me. Fratulon was only twenty paces or so away. He came toward us slowly, obviously in a state of complete exhaustion. His battle against the mirages must have drained his last reserves of strength. I also saw Vafron's other two henchmen. One of them lay covered with blood in the sand. The other was dangling from one of the silvery strands overhead.

When Fratulon shoved Ice Claw off of his victim, the chretkor continued to stare incredulously at his icy talons. Sawbones proceeded to search Vafron. After a while, he stood up again, appearing to stare through narrowed eyes into nothingness. Then he uttered a loud curse.

"What's the matter?" I inquired. "What did you find?"

Pointing to Vafron, he said: "They were Kralesians!" He gave no further explanation, finally changing the subject. "We have to go back to Tarkihl. Get the rayguns from the corpses. We'll still have good use for them."

I made a suggestion: "Shouldn't we try to find Komyal's radio equipment and send for some help?"

Fratulon was decisively against this. "No way! We'll make it back on our own."

I did not understand why he refused to call for help, but I contented myself with his decision. Fratulon must certainly know what he was doing.

11/ FROM DEADLY VISIONS

The long arm was casting its shadow.

Orbanashol III was not the rightful successor to Gonozal VII. The former Emperor had left a son behind him who was 4 years old at the time of the accident. But the Crystal Prince had disappeared immediately after Gonozal's death. Orbanashol had declared him also dead and assumed the throne. Rumor had it that Orbanashol had not only eliminated his brother, the Imperator, but that he also had the latter's son on his conscience.

But Orbanashol knew better than this. He had had nothing to do with the disappearance of the Crystal Prince, and he suspected that he was still alive. Because of this, Orbanashol III saw that his power was endangered, and therefore he instituted a feverish search for him throughout the galaxy. However, until now it had not met with success.

Orbanashol's sole point of reference was the fact that someone else had accompanied the rightful heir to the throne when he had disappeared. With Atlan, the Crystal Prince, had gone Fratulon, the mystery-shrouded physician to Gonozal VII.

For 13 long years, Orbanashol's search for Atlan had been without success. But now old Sawbones, Fratulon, was forced to ask himself whether or not the Imperator had finally picked up the proper trail . . .

* * * *

The dune rover had been stripped out completely.

The Zagors had stolen everything that wasn't riveted down. Of course we had figured as much, yet I had

secretly hoped they would at least leave the radio unharmed so that we could make contact with Tarkihl. Maybe Fratulon might have even changed his mind and could have been persuaded to call for help. But now such speculations were more or less immaterial.

We retreated into the machine's cockpit in order to take a rest. So far the Zagors had been unusually quiet. But this was the way they always became after their "singing god" of the silver strands had made a manifestation.

I searched through the rover for food supplies and articles of equipment we might have used. But the Zagors hadn't overlooked a thing. The water containers had been emptied to the last drop.

It made me swear aloud.

Ice Claw fooled with the air-conditioning system, but he didn't succeed in getting it to operate. "What I wouldn't give for a little refrigeration!" he said. "I won't be able to stand this heat much longer—I'm going to melt!"

The chretkor's perpetual yammering was slowly getting on my nerves. "If you do melt," I snapped at him, "I'll collect you in a container and bury you in any place you choose!"

As was to be expected, Ice Claw was offended, but as far as I was concerned, so be it. I was suffering hardships as much as he was, but I didn't keep crying about it to the two of them.

Meanwhile, Fratulon had not reacted to any of this. He only sat there and stared into emptiness. I was certain that he was thinking about Vafron. He had referred to him and the others as "Kralasians."

When he finally did move, it was only to leave the cockpit and the rover. "We have to move on," he said tersely, and he set himself in motion.

* * * *

The sun was at its zenith and shone down on us with a merciless intensity. The silvery net over our heads did not provide very much shade, but nevertheless it was some relief to seek even that protection.

In order to follow its shadow we had to move in a strange zig-zag fashion. It reminded me of my childhood when I used to play a certain game with Farnathia. In designated rooms of Tarkihl we would avoid stepping on certain mosaic tiles in the floor while we would favor others. Whoever was first to step on a green tile would lose. And on other days other floor tiles would be taboo . . .

What we were doing now was similar. Ice Claw and I played the rules of the game and followed the shadow lines of the silvery net. Only Fratulon failed to concern himself with this and walked straight ahead. After a while I realized that it took a lot more out of me to follow the weaving path of the shadows, so I finally chose the route Sawbones was on. But Ice Claw was not to be diverted.

In a corner of the dune rover he had found a white chart or map of some kind, which he had fastened over his head. Although the white material served to reflect much of the sunlight, he continued to complain as much as before.

"If I survive this march through the Spider Desert," he said gravely, "I'm going to build a monument out of ice. I'll take a trip to the polar regions and there I'll carve a giant statue out of the ice and have it brought here. And I'll spare no cost on whatever technical installations it will take to keep the monument from melting down under the searing rays of the sun."

* * * *

"Zagors!" shouted Ice Claw and drew his raygun.

"Leave your weapons where they are!" ordered Fratulon as he continued forward unconcernedly.

The sun had passed its highest position, yet it was even hotter than before. The sand seemed to reflect more heat than ever. I would have preferred taking off my boots, but then the soles of my feet would have probably been roased by the sand.

"Zagors!" Ice Claw exclaimed again. "Darn it, Sawbones, don't you see those reptiles? We're moving straight at them."

"Let them have their peace," said Fratulon. We could hear the weariness in his voice.

"But they've taken up positions against us," cried Ice Claw, alarmed. "They're moving!"

"That's only the wind!"

"They're coming at us!"

"It's only an optical illusion. The shimmering of the air is tricking you."

We passed the 20 Zagors without event. Ice Claw calmed down when closer inspection revealed that they were dangling from the silvery strands of the web. What visions must the humming and vibrating net have enticed them with to make them jump into its grasp?

It would remain their secret forever.

* * * *

My feet became heavier and heavier.

In front of me, Fratulon was staggering through the sand. Whenever he would lift one foot he would lean toward the other, so that looking at him made me quite dizzy. It cost him such an effort to wade through the sand that it seemed his feet were asleep.

But he would not take off his chest armor.

I begged him to. "You must feel as though you were in a bake oven," I said . . . And I told him: "Your armor is sucking in heat and accumulating it . . . " I

implored: "Throw your cuirass away. Rid yourself of all that ballast!"

But there was no more use demanding that of him than it would have been to ask him to take off his skin.

Ice Claw and I supported each other as we went along, which was more to my benefit than his because his body felt pleasantly cool.

"Do you hear it, Atlan?" asked Ice Claw.

"The humming?"

"Yes." Now we are goners! The web is beginning to vibrate again . . . the singing is in the air . . . !"

"Fools!" Fratulon snapped at us without turning around. "That's only the wind playing through those strands!"

I shook my head doubtfully, although he couldn't see me. Ahead of us rose a strange but somehow familiar structure. The silvery strands no longer seemed to exist. I tore myself away from Ice Claw and hurried my steps, finally overtaking Fratulon.

The strange image loomed before me from the desert like a mountain of bronze. It was not especially high, but nonetheless gigantic. Its profile was that of an obtuse triangle, 10 kilometers long and 6 kilometers wide. I knew that massive pile by heart, because from my present position I would not have been able to thus observe its architectural dimensions.

"Tarkihl!" cried Ice Claw.

So it was the beginning of another mirage. It was the peculiar subtlety of the silvery strands not to produce frightening visions but rather to entice us with the visions of secret desire. Thus they were magically materializing the palace of Tarkihl for us out of the desert sands. It lay there in the rays of the setting sun, glowing with the color of solid, unworked bronze. Its countless domelike protrusions threw long shadows onto the desert.

"We've made it!" I heard Fratulon exclaim in triumph.

I hastened my pace still more. If I was to be the victim of an illusion, then I should not be dnied the vision of Farnathia, as well. I wished for her. With every fibre of my will I sought to conjure her there. But the silvery strands did not materialize her out of the desert.

Instead, the humming and vibrating created a troop of soldiers.

I came to a halt.

This was no illusion. The images were too real. The soldiers had the right proportions in relation to their surroundings and they produced sounds that matched their movements in an exact formation.

This was reality.

We had actually made it. But for some reason I experienced no elation about it.

The soldiers came to a stop in front of us. They were all tall, imposing Arkonides who wore the uniforms of the Tattos' Palace Guard.

Their commanding officer stepped in front of Sawbones. "Fratulon, physician to the Tatto, Armanck Declanter, I arrest you in the name of Orbanashol the Third! I shall expect you to offer no resistance and to conduct yourself in a manner that will do credit to a man of your station."

"Resistance? Conduct?" said Fratulon critically. He knew he was too weak for either a proper defense or even acceptable comportment. He swayed slightly, vacillating for a moment, but when he finally addressed the leader of the troop guards his gaze was firm. "Who issued the order for my arrest?" he inquired.

The guard officer hesitated, but then he controlled himself and answered in a confidential tone: "A confidant of the Imperator has arrived at the palace. He has

full authority here. It's this one who put out the warrant for your arrest. You will follow us now, Fratulon.''

The Tatto's crack bodyguards surrounded Sawbones and marched away with him toward Tarkihl. Ice Claw and I were left behind, completely disregarded. And I was too stunned to even collect my wits about me. Everything had happened with such surprising swiftness.

Fratulon put under detention? For what reason? What had he done?

I could not comprehend it all.

But I was determined to find out. I took Ice Claw's crystalline arm and followed the soldiers to Tarkihl.

Whatever may have happened, old Sawbones could count on me!

MICHAEL DEMAS, 74 Twin Brooks Lane, Fairfield/CT 06430, critiques PR with these observations and recommendations:

Dear Perry crew,

Some comments on the "new" Perry Rhodan book and questions follow . . .

First of all, I almost passed #104 over because I'm used to the old cover format. The new format makes it look more like an individual science fiction novel rather than a continuing series. At first I thought it was one of the three missing episodes because of the cover change until I saw the 104 inconspicuously in the corner. George Wilson is a good artist, but no one is going to make me forget Gray Morrow. If Morrow was tired of doing the covers and quit, Wilson is a good replacement. But if Morrow was fired, then please rehire him! His dynamic covers are what attracted me to Rhodan in the first place!

The worst news of all is the demoted frequency. Are sales that bad? Everyone else, and me included, was waiting for 3 books a month. Possibly the reason for the sales decreasing is due to new people afraid to buy Rhodan because of the large number on the front. They're afraid if they like him that much, they'll want to buy all the back issues, but can't afford spending over $100.00.

A solution to this is possibly summarizing the first 100 books in a 2 volume set. Each book containing 50 past episodes. Each summary about 3 to 4 pages. After the new Rhodan fan finishes the summaries, they can flow into #101.

NEW to the Ranks of Rhofans is PETER NICHOLS of 14 Ruscoe Crescent, Weston, Ontario M9P 1P3, CANADA:

Dear Forry Ackerman:

About three months ago I'd never heard of Perry Rhodan. Now I have the entire series. I started off with #94 and it took me a while to get everything in proper context.

After I got the overview things were just fine and I've many hours of delectable reading ahead.

NEW CLUB ANNOUNCED:

Dear Perryscope

For some time a new idea has been growing inside my mutant mind. The idea: Invent a club!! So here it is: E.D.R. or Eternal Domain for Rhofans.

Anybody between the ages of 12 and 2001 are welcome to join. The only price you have to pay to join is: Be humans, Mutants, Arkonides, Akonides or Immortal Unknowns. You Druufs in disguise, too bad. No one over four meters high and six foot wide. To join write myself, the president, Tony Turley, Rt. 9, Box 803, Anniston, Alabama 36201, or Co-President John H. Hensley, Star Route, Box 80, Edna, Texas, 77957.

Remember, be loyal to Rhofandom!! And Forry & the gang of course.

NATHAN C. BRINDLE, 7730 Grandview Dr., Indianapolis/IN 46260 remarks:

Dear Forry:

Triplanetary Agent was good—not great, but good. I say this because I am a Doc Smith fan, too, and *nobody* (except maybe Walter Ernsting) can or could write like Doc.

As to PR, I direct your attention to #105. One would be inclined to think that IT is getting a bit sadistic in his *old* (ha!) age. I did like the story, tho. Division Three was one of the best ideas thought of for the series. The PR short story in 105 was pretty good, too.

In my last two letters, I said that I would donate to the Ackermansion. Well, here it is, finally! Sorry it took so long.

DAVE TROUP joins the group from 13771 Typee Way, Irvine/CA 92714:

Mr. & Mrs. Ackerman;

Once more I spend 13¢ to send you a review of this month's *Perry Rhodan*. Altho none of my letters will probably ever be published, I feel that it is my duty as a dedicated Rhofan (I spend 81% of my "spare" time doing PR related functions) to send you a monthly letter.

GEORGE WILSON'S ARTWORK IS FANTASTIC!!! I don't wish to start a controversy about whether Gray or George's work is better, so I'll just say they're

both GREAT!! The new look is good, too, altho I like the cover comments that you had before.

Too bad about not being able to find "The House", but perhaps it is in another space/time continuum. However, "The Impossible Highway" was an excellent example of a good SciFi story. I'm glad you printed it, but I really hope that "The House" appears in the future.

MIKE A! MARTIN exclaims from 3843 Los Padres Rd., Santa Maria/CA 93454:

Dear Forry;

Congrats on PERRY RHODANs #106-107! It looks like the beginning of the end for Cardif with his cancerous, runaway mitosis, though it serves him right. I hope injuries inflicted upon the genuine Rhodan aren't irreparable. I think that the present situation is the closest that Perry has ever come to joining Khrest and Thora, wherever they are, in the great Beyond. The present PR events will remind us Rhofans that though immortal, Perry and Co. aren't indestructible. Atlan, too, was portrayed realistically and humanly. Good job.

"Gold" by Gold was pretty good, but it didn't match the finale of Temple's "Experiment in Genius". Truly inspired.

I hope that 108's "Duel under the Double Sun" is on par with 106-107. Keep up the ep work! Shantel, Forvala and Live Long and Prosper!

AD

THE PEACELORD *and* THE ANCIENT ASTRONAUT, both brought to your door!

$10.50 for the next 5 books.

$21 for the next 10.

Oregon subscriber Jeff Brudos of Salem gets his subscription *doubled* this time . . . and nextime YOU could be the lucky winner.

TWO novels in one volume means you'll be reading TEN Rhodan/Atlan adventures for only $10.50 or 20 adventures in 10 books for $21.

NB: These rates good only during month of issuance and until next price change (if any). IF this is a back number when you buy it, check CURRENT ad.

Check or M.O. only. Don't write on back of either and Canadians must send POSTAL MONEY ORDER only, payable in U.S. DOLLARS.

KRIS DARKON
2495 Glendower Ave.
Hollywood/CA 90027

PERRY RHODAN "Menace of Atomigeddon" & ATLAN #2 and next 4 books or next 9 (circle one) . . . etc [coupon]

NAME (Print Clearly) .....

(AGE) .....

ADDRESS .....

CITY .....

STATE (Spell Out) .....

ZIP .....

COUNTRY .....

KRIS DARKON
2495 Glendower Ave.
Hollywood/CA 90027

PERRY RHODAN

Just $1.25 each

- #61 Death Waits in Semispace Mahr
- #62 The Last Days of Atlantis Scheer
- #63 The Tigris Leaps Brand
- #64 Ambassadors from Aurigel Mahr
- #65 Renegades of the Future Mahr
- #66 The Horror Voltz
- #67 Crimson Universe Scheer
- #68 Under the Stars of Druufon Darlton
- #69 The Bonds of Eternity Darlton
- #70 Thora's Sacrifice Brand
- #71 The Atom Hell of Grautier Mahr
- #72 Caves of the Druufs Mahr
- #73 Spaceship of Ancestors Darlton
- #74 Checkmate: Universe Mahr
- #75 Planet Topide, Please Reply Brand
- #76 Recruits For Arkon Darlton
- #77 Conflict Center: Naator Darlton
- #78 Power Key Scheer
- #79 The Sleepers Voltz
- #80 The Columbus Affair Scheer

Available wherever paperbacks are sold or use this coupon.

ace books, (Dept. MM) Box 576, Times Square Station
New York, N.Y. 10036

Please send me titles checked above.

I enclose $ ..... Add 35c handling fee per copy.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State ..... Zip .....

54B

PERRY RHODAN

Just $1.25 each

#81 **Pucky's Greatest Hour** Brand
#82 **Atlan in Danger** Brand
#83 **Ernst Ellert Returns** Darlton
#84 **Secret Mission: Moluk** Voltz
#85 **Enemy in the Dark** Mahr
#86 **Blazing Sun** Darlton
#87 **The Starless Realm** Darlton
#88 **Mystery of the Ant** Scheer
#89 **Power's Price** Brand
#90 **Unleashed Powers** Brand
#91 **Friend to Mankind** Voltz
#92 **Target Star** Scheer
#93 **Vagabond of Space** Darlton
#94 **Action: Division Three** Mahr
#95 **Plasma Monster** Mahr
#96 **Horn: Green** Voltz
#97 **Phantom Flat** Darlton
#98 **Idol from Passa** Mahr
#99 **Blue System** Scheer
#100 **Desert of Death** Mahr

Available wherever paperbacks are sold or use this coupon.

ace books, (Dept. MM) Box 576, Times Square Station
New York, N.Y. 10036

Please send me titles checked above.

I enclose $..... Add 35c handling fee per copy.

Name .....

Address .....

City..... State..... Zip.....

There are a lot more where this one came from!

ORDER your FREE catalog of ACE paperbacks here. We have hundreds of inexpensive books where this one came from priced from 75¢ to $2.50. Now you can read all the books you have always wanted to at tremendous savings. Order your *free* catalog of ACE paperbacks now.

ACE BOOKS • Box 576, Times Square Station • New York, N.Y. 10036

THE WASP MEN ATTACK

This is the first of three novels of the Perry Rhodan Series that had been "skipped over." From the first moment the many fans of the Series learned ther ere three episodes that had not been published, they set up such a sustained howl of indignation that both editor and publisher had to agree that it had been a mistake to leave these novels out of the Series. Here, truly by Popular Demand, is the first of the "Missing Novels"—

THE WASP MEN ATTACK

ATLAN #1

At last, the dynamic spinoff from the Perry Rhodan Series—the all new phenomenal adventures of Atlan, the ancient astronaut. Fantastic adventures of time and space that explore the amazing mysterie
hold the

Internet Archive
Perry Rhodan: The Wasp Men Att
ISBN: B000HTBA1W
UsedAcceptable
2012-09-08
E1598C4
1